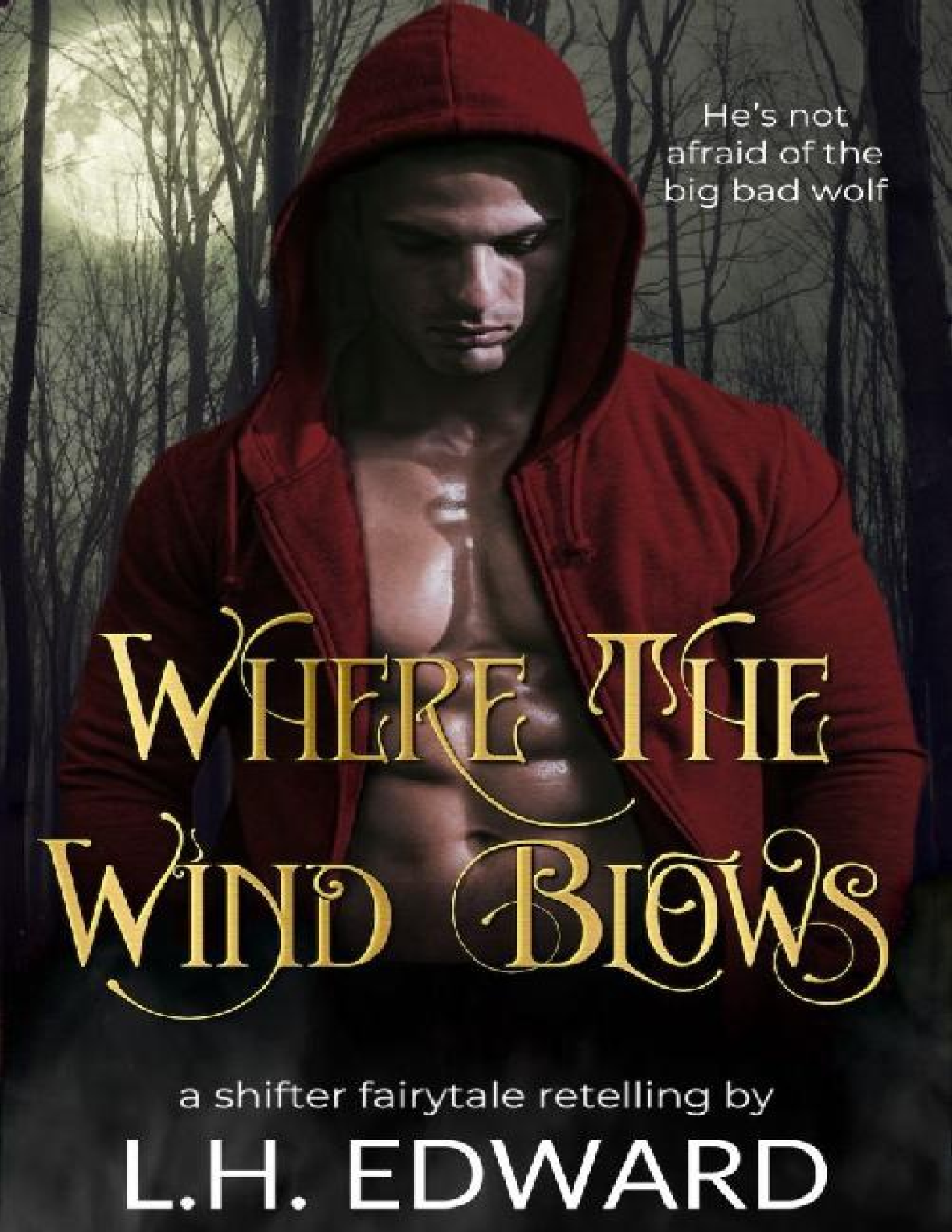
He's not afraid of the big bad wolf
WHERE THE WIND BLOWS
a shifter fairytale retelling by
L.H. EDWARD

# WHERE THE WIND BLOWS

SHIFTER FAIRYTALE RETELLING

L.H. EDWARD

Lisa Edward writing as L.H. Edward

**WHERE THE WIND BLOWS**
A Shifter Fairytale Retelling

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Cover design: Lilliana Anderson
Editing: More Than Words Copyediting and Proofreading
Interior design and formatting: Masen Ink Pty Ltd

First ebook edition: August 2022
First published as an ebook and as a print-on-demand edition: August 2022

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Acknowledgments

# ABOUT WHERE THE WIND BLOWS

There's one thing I know as certain in this world—***Werewolves are real***—and it's my purpose in life to get rid of them.

At twelve, ***Connor Walsh*** experienced the best and worst month of his life while summering at his cousins' lake house, nestled in the woods of Portland. What started with a proclamation that Maisie Blake was the girl of his dreams, quickly turned dark when he lost his parents to a brutal werewolf attack on the side of the road.

Fourteen years later, Connor no longer dreams of pretty girls. Instead, he's honed his skills and spent his years researching, hunting, and killing the shifters with one goal—seeking vengeance by eradicating the species.

Forever moving, forever chasing, he's only one step behind the shifter he's been circling.

When ***Maisie Blake*** was eleven, she met a boy in the woods of Portland at her friend's lake house. What started as her first glimpse into what she hoped would be her first love, turned into a nightmare when hunters killed her parents under the light of the full moon.

Forced to live with her grandma's pack from then on, she eventually escaped the confines and rituals she hated and has been running ever since. Running from the pack, running from hunters who are only ever one step behind her no matter where she goes. She no longer dreams of love of any kind. Her sole focus is self-preservation.

When Connor and Maisie's paths collide after fourteen years, both feel that initial childhood spark and long to cultivate it. But when their realities make them the hunter and hunted, these sworn enemies must choose a path forward—either find a way to the happily ever after they both long for, or destroy each other denying it.

***Where the Wind Blows*** is a paranormal romance, shifter retelling of Little Red Riding Hood.

*Not all villains are evil, nor are all heroes good.*
*It depends on which side you are fighting.*

# PROLOGUE

# CONNOR

The black leather was hot against my bare thighs as I made myself comfortable in the back seat of my dad's two-door Chevy Impala. Waving through the rear window to my cousins, I said goodbye to another summer at my aunt and uncle's lake house, nestled in the woods in Portland. Every year it was the same. My mom, dad, and I would stay with my mom's sister, her husband, and their two kids, Lily and Dylan. Lily was great, she was only a year younger than me, and we liked most of the same stuff. We'd swing on the rope hanging from a branch off the old willow tree and see who could make the biggest splash into the water. We'd explore the woods surrounding the lake house and sometimes catch bugs under moss-covered rocks or from the hollows of fallen trees to torment our moms with. She had always been fun, ever since I can remember, but this year it had been different. Lily had brought a friend with her so she'd have someone to talk to, and instead of catching bugs and tossing a ball around with me, Lily and her friend Maisie Blake sat on deck chairs, giggled for no reason, and sunbathed.

Instead of us kids tormenting our moms, Dylan spent a month teasing Maisie. My mom said it was because he was fifteen, and that's what fifteen-year-old boys do. Well, I may only be twelve, but I know a butthead when I see one. Dylan was a jerk. He'd always been a jerk, and the older he got, the bigger a jerk he became. He teased Maisie about her eyes, but I thought it was cool the way they didn't match. Mom, who was a doctor, said it had some fancy name—heterochromia— where one iris was pale blue, and the other was a mix of blue and a dark chocolate brown, almost black. It looked like her pupil in one eye was huge and made her different, kinda special. I'd never seen eyes that were different colors before. All I saw when I looked in the mirror were my weird-ass brown eyes with flecks of gold that matched the color of my hair.

My dad turned on the ignition, and the old Chevy purred to life. Dad loved his car. My mom joked that he loved it more than he loved her. He always tuned the engine and carried out routine maintenance himself, and a couple of times, since I'd been old enough to see under the hood, I'd helped him. "She was a well-oiled machine," he'd say. "Treat her right, and she'll never let you down." Dad sure did treat her well, and so far, he'd been right.

Lily and Maisie moved to the side of the car with my uncle and aunt. Lily waved madly, her hand blurring with how fast it moved, a huge grin on her sun-kissed face, while Maisie looked sad, her farewell not so enthusiastic. I waved back, my heart heavy in my chest as I took one last look at Maisie's freckled cheeks and hypnotic eyes and tried to smile. She bit her lip for a second before running forward and tapping on the window for me to wind it down, which I did, and then it happened —she leaned in through the open window and kissed me square on the lips. It wasn't like in the movies, and it was over before I realized what was happening, but I was hooked. Walking backward

slowly, a deep red crept up Maisie's neck and took over her cheeks, but she didn't look away. Instead, her eyes met with mine and she gave me a shy smile. My heart thrummed loudly in my ears as I locked her face and that kiss to memory . . . and then I returned her smile.

Dirt from the long driveway blocked my view of the house as we drove away, but I kept my arms crossed on the back of the seat, chin resting on my hands as I squinted through the dust and watched Maisie disappear from view. I never wanted the summers to end, but they always did no matter how hard I wished for it. The hum of the engine made my eyes tired, and my lids flickered as I fought to keep them open. It would be five hours before we'd be back home in Washington, and the sun was already disappearing behind the heavy woods lining both sides of the road.

Finally, I turned back around in my seat and kicked off my sneakers, trying to get comfortable for the long drive. My parents were smirking at each other like there was some secret they held only for them, but I didn't care. Maisie had kissed me, and the taste of her bubblegum lip gloss was still on my lips.

My lids were heavy, and I couldn't fight it any longer, so I let them close. It had been a busy month, and I'd had to try extra hard to stay one step ahead of Dylan. We were the same height, but he was into lifting weights, and his arms were about the size of my legs. He'd teased me when I'd tried to lift one of his dumbbells, but I got my own back when I did a perfect backflip off the rope and into the slow-flowing water. By next summer, I'd be a black belt at Taekwondo and able to kick his ass. I smiled to myself. I was looking forward to that.

My head knocked against the car window, and my eyes sprung open just long enough to see that we were still on the long dirt road that joined the main highway. I closed my eyes again, resting my head against the glass. Maisie had liked my backflip too. She'd even clapped, and when I walked past her, she'd smiled the kind of smile that made you feel important as she flicked her strawberry-blonde hair from her freckled cheeks.

My head jerked forward, banging hard against the window, and I cursed under my breath.

"Connor Walsh, what did you just say?" my mom asked from the front seat. "That's your cousin Dylan talking. I swear it'll take a month to wipe that boy's bad influence from your mouth."

"Sorry, Mom, I keep hurting my head." I rubbed my palm over my temple, feeling for a bump I was sure was there.

My mom's tanned arm reached into a bag behind my dad's seat. "Why don't you lie down? You can fold up your dad's red hoodie and use it as a pillow."

I bunched up the hoodie and scooted down the seat to stretch out. Before long, the car's motion had my eyes closing again, and my mind wandering back to Maisie—did this make her my girlfriend? Would I ever see her again? Her lips were so soft. I couldn't help but grin as I licked the bubblegum flavor.

"We'll be home in a few hours, my baby boy."

"Mom, I'm not a baby." I hated it when she called me that. It wasn't cute anymore.

"Connor Walsh, you will always be my baby until the end of time. I love you."

With a yawn, I mumbled, "I love you too, Mom."

The slamming of the car door woke me with a fright. I sat up, rubbing my eyes with the heels of my hands and wiping the drool from my cheek. "Are we home?" I looked around, but we weren't in the garage. From what I could see through my bleary eyes, we were still in the woods.

"No, buddy, we've run over something on the road. I think we've got a flat."

"I'll come too." Anything to do with this car and I was right there.

"It's okay, buddy. Your mom can hold the torch for me. You go back to sleep."

Mom and Dad climbed out of the car, closing the doors with a heavy thud. I watched through the window as Mom held a dimly lit torch aimed at the front passenger-side tire. If it hadn't been for the huge full moon, I don't think Dad would've been able to see anything. The car pumped up on the jack, and I lay back down, there was nothing to see from the window anymore, and we'd be back on the road soon enough. With eyes closed, I listened to the muted voices of my parents, my mom's laugh making me smile.

*Thud!*

Something heavy hit the side of the car, jolting it from the jack. Clambering up to see what had happened, my eyes bugged, and I rubbed them, sure that I must be dreaming. But it was no dream, more like a living nightmare as two huge wolves circled the car from either end and rounded on my parents. Only they weren't wolves, at least not the kind I'd seen on the Nature channel. No, these were different, they looked more like the type on the late-night horror movies my dad sometimes let me watch. They walked on muscular hind legs, their bodies lean and covered in dark hair. Long snouts ended with lips curled in a snarl as saliva dripped from huge, pointed fangs. Hungry yellow eyes shone as one took a clawed swipe at my mom. Mom screamed, and Dad stepped in front of her, shielding her from danger as he swung the heavy tire iron at them.

Pounding on the window, I hollered to them, "Mom! Dad!" It was no use. A spray of blood hit the window, blocking my view, the thick liquid running down the glass like tomato ketchup. I was safe, at least I thought I was, but my mom and dad were surely dead. Vomit burned my throat, but I choked it down. I wanted to scream, jump out of the car, and beat those animals with the same tire iron my dad had tried to fight them off with. But I couldn't. I couldn't move or make a sound. Instead, I slid from my seat and curled up in the foot space behind the front seat, covering myself with my dad's red hoodie. Their screams became less forceful, quieter. Sickening gurgles and gasps for air took over. Finally, the only sounds left were snarls and growls as I imagined my parents being torn limb from limb. There was nowhere to go, so I stayed, my eyes squeezed shut and my hands pressed against my ears, crying like a baby and hiding like a coward.

It was light out by the time I dared peek from under the hoodie. I could hear voices just outside the car, but my heart broke, the pressure in my chest squeezing the air from my lungs with what they were saying. "That's another two dead from last night and one the night before. We might have ourselves a serial killer."

"Sheriff, it looks more like an animal attack, don't you think?"

"Now, Deputy, I know what you're thinking, but no one wants to hear your cockamamie theories of werewolves."

"Well, it has been a full moon the last two nights, Sheriff."

"Keep your theory to yourself, ya hear me? People are gonna think my deputy's gone lost his mind if you keep talking like that."

*Two dead*.

I thought I'd cried all my tears the night before, but sure enough, more flowed with the words being spoken out loud. Where would I go? Images of my parents being torn to pieces raced through my mind. My mom's sparkling eyes as she laughed and joked with me turning to cold, lifeless orbs.

I sat up, wiping my swollen eyes with the backs of my hands.

"Sheriff, there's someone back here." A man wearing a deputy's uniform swung open the car door and reached over the front seat to where I was still crouched on the floor. He had a thin face and large hook nose, his ice-blue eyes small and beady. "Son, I'm Deputy Roland of the Portland PD. Are you all right? Do you know what happened out here?"

*Werewolves*. I shook my head. I didn't want anyone thinking I'd gone lost my mind.

# CHAPTER ONE

# CONNOR

***Fourteen years later***

Swinging my legs over the edge of the bed, I shook out the nightmare that had plagued me nearly every night since I was twelve. I was a ball of sweat, my heart still pounding as I scrubbed my hands over my face, rubbing the last of my mom's screams and images of blood from my mind . . . there was always so much blood. Last night had been a bad one, seeming so real that I could smell the musky scent of the wolves, hear their snarls, and taste the salty tears that had streamed down my cheeks fourteen years earlier. Every month the recurring nightmare became increasingly more vivid until it was unbearable on the nights of the full moon, and this month was no exception. It was as if my dream told me where I needed to go next and taunted me that I still hadn't caught up with and eradicated the murderous creatures.

A gentle hand touched my bare back, and I nearly leaped out of my skin, forgetting someone else was in the room on the other side of the bed. "I like your ink, Sugar," said a voice that was hoarse from years of too many cigarettes.

I knew what she was referring to, but her fingertips traced the design running diagonally across my flesh to emphasize her statement.

"Thanks." Reaching over my left shoulder, I ran my fingers over the ridges of scar-tissue etched in my skin, hidden beneath a dragon tattoo that covered most of my back. I wore the scars as a constant reminder that I should never underestimate my opponent. I'd been overconfident during my first werewolf hunt and had paid the price and nearly lost my life due to cockiness. There'd been two of them, just like with my parents, but I hadn't seen the second one until it circled behind me. I'd stormed in, silver dagger raised, fully focused on a singular creature hunched over a deer it was devouring, and ignored my surroundings. It was a rookie mistake. Luckily the second animal had taken a swipe at me—first maim, then go in for the kill. It was luckier still that my Taekwondo training had become second nature, and I could connect a kick that knocked it off balance, just long enough for me to kill its mate before turning my attention back to the second shifter.

"Don't ya just wish dragons were real?" she said dreamily, still tickling over the design on my back.

I turned to face the woman I'd met the night before in the local bar. Her perfectly applied, if not too heavy makeup wasn't looking so perfect anymore. "How do you know they're not? There are stranger things out there than dragons." I stood, shaking off the last of the dream, the yellow eyes I saw every night fading to black. "I need to get going. It was real nice though, Katie."

She smirked. “It’s Kerry. But Katie’s close.”

“Sorry.” I scruffed the back of my head, the tangled blond hair still damp with sweat, and searched the floor in the half-light for my discarded clothes.

A lamp flicked on. “Is that better?”

“Yeah, thanks.” I always hated this part, the awkward morning after the drunken night before. If I was smart, I’d leave quietly in the middle of the night to avoid it, but sometimes even a loner who lives for the kill needs some comfort and a warm body to hold.

I found my jeans and scooped them up from the floor, but I had no idea where my boxers had landed. Not wanting to spend any more time naked in front of Kerry’s leering eyes, I yanked on my jeans, the denim soft from years of wear, and then went in search of my tee, red hoodie, and boots.

“You don’t have to run out so quickly, Sugar. It’s still early, and my shift at the bar doesn’t start until after lunch.” She crawled on hands and knees across the crumpled sheets to the end of the bed where I was standing. “I could go another round or two with you.” Her hands slid up my chest, taking their time to feel my pecs and broad shoulders. Her pointer finger, the red nail polish chipped from the tip, snaked down over my abdominals to the button fastening my jeans. “We don’t get many like you in this town. Would be a shame for you to leave now.”

Last night had been enough. Enough to take my mind off things and work out some frustrations. Enough to give me that little bit of human contact I craved every now and then when thoughts of my parents were the only thing crowding my noisy mind. But my mind was quiet again now, calm, clear, and focused on what I needed to do, and it was time to move on.

“I could fix you some eggs. Maybe some pancakes too. What do you say?” Her eyes pleaded, the black smudged mascara casting circles down to her cheekbones.

I shrugged on my tee and finally found my hoodie and boots under a pile of clothes on a chair in the corner. “I really feel like bacon and sausage, and a decent cup of coffee. Don’t trouble yourself. I’ll head into town to the diner.”

“I’ll come too.” Before I could object, she was off the bed and kicking around clothes on the floor.

So, it would take me a little longer to shake this one off. “I can wait a few minutes while you wash up, Kerry.” I wasn’t going anywhere with her panda eyes and bed hair. Besides, she’d been good company, and I wasn’t a total asshole, and I never knew when I’d be passing back through a town and might need a place to crash for the night.

She smiled and slinked into the bathroom, glancing over her shoulder as she entered to ensure I was looking. I gave her a nod in acknowledgment, and to tell her to get her ass into gear. It wasn’t so much that I was hungry, it was more that I was antsy. We’d come back around to another full moon, and if my gut was right, there would be another reported animal attack to tell me which direction this latest werewolf was now traveling.

The springs in the beat-up mattress creaked as I sat heavily on the end of the bed to pull on my scuffed army boots. I’d chased this creature for ten moon cycles, from one side of the country to the other. It moved quickly and was clever, never staying in one town for more than a month and zigzagging as it went. As a result, I’d always been one step behind, and it frustrated the hell out of me.

No other shifter I’d hunted had been as cunning. They had attacked people and stayed in the same town, quite often their hometown for months at a time. It had made my job easy. Go to the town, wait for the next full moon, and catch the creature in the act. The beasts had been brazen, almost daring the authorities or hunters to do anything about their habits and rarely covering their tracks. I guess they felt safe knowing that in the harsh light of day, they looked like everyone else so could blend in,

hovering in the background of a crime scene. They could gasp in horror and even cry and console the families of their victims. They could feed the rumor mill and gossip with the locals about wild dogs or coyotes because let's face it, no one in their right mind believed in werewolves.

But not this one. It killed animals, either finding a farm with livestock or a deer in the woods. It contradicted everything I thought I knew about these killers that I'd researched for the past fourteen years. I'd always thought they had no control over whom or what they attacked, and it had somehow given me a little comfort to think that my parents had died because they'd simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But now I had to wipe from my mind everything I'd thought was true about their habits because this werewolf knew what it was doing and seemed to be able to select its kill. But not only that, it appeared to have a conscience.

With my boots laced, I was ready to leave not only this room but also this town. I needed to see where the creature was now and then try to figure out where it may be heading, so I could get there first.

"How much longer you gonna be?" I hollered through the closed door.

"I'm comin', Sugar," she called back.

I wondered, not for the first time if I should just go. Snatching up my keys and wallet from the dresser, I called to her again, "I'll see you down there."

"Ain't we going together?" Her head poked through a crack in the door.

"We have to take two cars anyway. I won't be coming back here afterward."

She pouted. I'm sure it would have been cute when she was fifteen, but she was well on her way to being three times that age and cute had left her a long time ago. "Don't take too long, Kerry." I swung my keys around my finger by the sterling silver ring. "See ya there."

Her house was tiny but neat. As I followed the worn floral carpet of the hallway toward the front door, I passed a sunny living room where her dog lay sleeping on its bed. "See ya, Bruiser," I said, wondering why I never forgot the name of a pet, but had so much trouble remembering the women who came into my life and left just as quickly.

Bruiser's head lifted from his paws, the large black patch over his eye contrasting with his otherwise white coat as his face lit up at the sound of his name. "No, don't get up." I held out my hand to indicate stay, but he must have thought it was an invitation to come over for a pat. He bound over, pink tongue lolling to one side before he slobbered all over my hand and halfway up my arm.

I'd always wanted a dog. But living on the road and staying at motels that quite often weren't pet-friendly had prevented me from taking that step. Besides, owning a dog was a responsibility. It required you to be around to look after the animal, and in my line of work, it couldn't be guaranteed you'd be alive from one full moon to the next. There were a lot of things I'd wanted over the years. A house, somewhere to call home. A steady job and income, and more than once, I'd thought about what it would be like to settle down with someone and start a family.

"You're a good boy, aren't ya, Bruiser?" His soulful brown eyes gazed up at me as I scratched behind his ears. I had no idea how much longer I would be on the road, my need for vengeance fueling my nomadic lifestyle. But one day, I hoped to have it all. The white picket fence and a family like my parents had had before everything turned to shit. "A man can dream, can't he, fella?" With one last scruff under his chin, I was out the door.

My old Chevy was parked out front, and I gave her the once over to ensure she was still in one shiny black, pristine piece. She was my baby, just as she'd been my dad's baby for all those years. The car was a part of my history, a significant piece of the puzzle that had shaped me into the man I

was today. She had protected me from the werewolves when they'd killed my parents, and she'd kept me safe until the Sherriff and his deputy had arrived on the scene. The old girl had sat covered by a dust sheet in my uncle and aunt's garage for four years when I had to go live with them, and I'd kept her oil changed and engine tuned just as my dad had shown me until I was old enough to drive her.

Since then, she'd been a constant companion on my relentless road trip, and she'd never let me down. I'd slept in her on more than one occasion, the long back bench seat not as spacious as it was when I was twelve, but still comfortable enough to get me through countless nights parked on the side of the road.

She purred into life at the turn of the key. Quickly checking my reflection in the rearview mirror, I flattened down the dark-blond hair that needed a cut and scratched the three-day stubble on my square jaw. My gold-flecked eyes were still a little bloodshot from too many beers last night but it would have to do. I'd shave and clean up at the next town I reached. The rev of the engine had me grinning. I loved that sound, it meant we were going hunting again. As I pulled away from the curb, I wound down the window and let the warm breeze smack me in the face. South Carolina was humid and sticky in September, but the breeze made it bearable. Cotton and tobacco plantations, their mansions looming over fields ready for harvest, reminded me once again what town I was in. I could never hope to live in a home half their size, they were magnificent, and every time I'd passed through the area, the idea of knocking on someone's door and asking if I could walk through their home had crossed my mind. I loved architecture, and I'd seen every example, from Georgian to Ranch, and everything in between in my travels from one coast to the other.

Stones flicked up under the Chevy as I pulled into the diner's gravel parking lot, and I slowed, parking as far away from the other half a dozen cars as possible. This diner resembled every other I'd been to in a hundred or so small towns across the country. With a faded red and white awning, the only thing to ever change was the owner's name in neon lights. Al's Diner, Big Tony's Diner, Betty Lou's Diner. This one was owned by someone named Rick.

I pushed the heavy glass door open, and the familiar tinkling of a bell sounded. The beauty of having every diner I went to look the same was that I felt perfectly at home as soon as I entered.

I slid across a worn red vinyl seat into a booth, making sure I could see the mounted television above the counter. They always had the news playing softly, and I wanted to ensure I could catch the next bulletin when it aired.

"What can I get you?" an elderly woman asked, her pen poised above the order pad, ready and waiting.

Smiling, I took a moment to read the name badge pinned to her white, coffee-stained apron. "Hi, Alice, I'm waiting for someone, so just some coffee for now please."

She nodded. "Sure thing. Let me know when you're ready, hun." Alice was back in a minute with a coffee pot, and I quickly flipped over the upturned cup set on the table, so she could fill it with the steaming liquid.

I drummed my fingers against the white laminate table. If Kerry wasn't sitting across from me in five minutes, I'd be ordering and eating without her. Being a hunter taught me patience. I could sit for hours in a deserted park or alleyway, waiting for the slightest sign that something was about to go down. But when it came to food, my patience was pretty thin.

The six o'clock news came on, and I leaned toward the television, straining to hear. "Hey, Alice, can you turn the volume up a bit, please?"

"Sure thing, handsome." She smiled and reached for the remote. It always paid to take a moment to learn a person's name and be polite. My mom always said good manners didn't cost anything, and

it quite often got me an extra scoop of ice cream on my pie or a second helping for free.

It was still difficult to hear the reporter above the clatter of crockery, but I could read the news ticker across the bottom of the screen clearly enough. A vicious animal attack on a cattle ranch in Kansas with eight cows ripped open, their insides devoured. The authorities suspected wolves or wild dogs. The vision left no doubt in my mind what had committed the carnage, but damn, Kansas already. This creature was moving back across the country, and if my years of experience were right, it would be in Oregon by next month's full moon.

My drumming on the table became more determined. It was fourteen hours to Kansas, which would get me there as the sun set. It would be the final full moon of the cycle, the waning moon, and the last chance to kill the werewolf before it headed off again.

I needed to go, and I needed to go now. "Alice." I waved her over. "I'm ready to order, thanks." My stomach churned, but I knew I needed to eat before starting the grueling drive, so I ordered the works. Bacon, eggs, sausage, and pancakes with maple syrup.

The bell above the heavy glass door rang, and my heart sank. I was in no mood for making small talk with Kerry, it would only hold me up, and I wanted to eat as quickly as I could without giving myself indigestion, and then hit the road. I plastered on a smile, ready to greet her, only it wasn't her, it was a face I'd become far more familiar with over the years.

He was a little older, fourteen years older than when we had first met, but there was no mistaking the hook nose that was far too large for his drawn features. His hair had thinned to almost non-existent, but I would recognize Deputy Roland anywhere. I'd crossed paths many times over the years with the deputy from the night my parents were killed. At first, I thought it was a coincidence, but then realized we had much more in common than the inability to stay in one place for longer than a month or two. We may live a similar nomadic life, zigzagging from one small town to the next, but we were very different in one fundamental way.

He hunted werewolves for sport. I hunted for revenge.

With a simple nod in my direction, he acknowledged me, and I returned the gesture. He'd been at the last three towns I'd stopped at, his 1970 Ford pickup truck looking worse for wear, the shiny metal lockbox sitting proudly in the back the only thing he seemed to take care of. He stopped in front of the counter, taking note of the bulletin as the main headline repeated across the bottom of the screen. His back straightened, and he swung around to look me dead in the eye. There was no mistaking it. He knew as well as I did what had killed the cattle.

"You heading to Kansas, Red?" he asked, striding over to the edge of the table.

I hated it when he called me Red. It was a throwback to when he found me cowering in the back of my dad's car, wrapped in his new red hoodie. It was the same hoodie I still wore to this very day, but him referring to me as 'Red' brought back the night of my parent's slaughter like it had happened only yesterday.

Sitting back in my seat, I rested one arm along the length of the bench and tried to play it cool. "Deputy Roland, what brings you to Charleston?" I asked, avoiding the question he'd asked of me.

He grinned, and I noticed a gap where two teeth were missing. "No need to call me deputy these days, Red. I left law enforcement a long time ago. Too many rules, too many laws to uphold for people like us." I hated that he lumped me into the same basket as himself. I was nothing like him. "Better to make our own rules, hey boy." And I hated it when he called me boy. I just pretty much didn't want a bar of him. He nodded toward the news broadcast that had moved on to another story. "So, Kansas?" He pressed.

"I thought I might. You?"

He smirked. “Hell yeah! I’m in the mood for a little hunting.” He leaned forward, resting his fists on the edge of the laminate table. “We should put a wager on it. What do you say?” This was what I hated about him the most. For him, it was all a game.

I shook my head, trying to keep from jumping up and smacking him down. “It’s not a sport to me, it’s not fun, and I definitely don’t want to bet on it.” My jaw clenched. I was about five seconds away from spreading that hook nose across his thin face.

He threw his head back and laughed, taking pleasure in the fact he’d pissed me off. “Oh, come on, boy, I’m just messing with ya. We both know I’ll get it, and get it good tonight.” He lifted the edge of his sweat-stained gray tee just high enough to show his macabre belt, lined with sharp, yellowed fangs. “There’s a spot for it right there.” He pointed to an empty place on the belt, and my fists balled.

The only way to extract a fang from a werewolf was to rip it out while it was still turned. As soon as the creature drew its last dying breath, the wolf would revert back into human form in time to expel that final breath. His collection of souvenirs could only mean one thing. He didn’t shoot to kill as quickly and painlessly as possible. He shot to maim so he would have time to add to his keepsakes. There was no denying I hated shifters with every fiber of my being. They had ripped my parents apart and in turn, ripped my world apart, but there was always a tiny piece of me that remembered they were human twenty-eight nights of the month. They deserved to die, but die without prolonging the pain.

The bell above the door rang again, and I looked over to see Kerry bustling in. No wonder she’d taken so long, her hair was styled in curls, her makeup far too heavy for six-thirty in the morning. “Hey, Sugar, sorry I’m late.” She slid across the bench facing me, completely ignoring Roland. He took a step back, returning to the counter and the news broadcast, and I forced myself to shift my full attention to Kerry. This wasn’t the time to get into it with him. I was passing through town just as he was. It would raise too many questions if two apparent strangers got into a brawl in the middle of a diner.

“I’ve already ordered.” My mood had soured. I wanted to eat and leave, but I couldn’t be rude. “I’ll get Alice over so you can get something too.”

“Always in such a hurry,” she protested. “I was thinking maybe we could spend the day . . .”

I cut her off before she could plan our future together. “I need to head off as soon as we’re done here. Need to get to Kansas.”

“Who’s in Kansas, Sugar?” Her brow was cocked. Surely she couldn’t be jealous. I’d known her for all of eight hours.

Sighing, I could go into great detail about who was in Kansas, but the truth was simple. “Family.”

# CHAPTER TWO

# CONNOR

These were the times when I really did wish I had a four-legged friend to keep me company. Six hours into a fourteen-hour drive with the window down and the radio blaring, and I wanted someone or something to talk to.

Oh, who was I kidding? Of all the women I'd met over the years, I wouldn't want any of them to be sitting in the seat beside me. That seat was my mom's for all the years she sat beside my dad. It was reserved for someone special, for someone worthy. There had only ever been one girl who had touched my heart and given me those butterflies that teenage girls talked about. But I hadn't seen her since I was twelve and even then, it was only for a month at the lake house.

Maisie Blake. Her name still made me smile. The way it rolled off the tongue and sounded in my ears brought back memories of a time when life was simple—happy. From the crinkle of her button nose when she giggled to the pink blush that swept from her chest to the apples of her cheeks, stopping just below those odd-colored eyes. We may have only known each other for a month, but she had firmly lodged herself in my heart and never left.

Every night of that summer vacation as I lay in one room with Dylan on the top bunk and me on the bottom, I would listen through the wall, my ear pressed hard against the shiplap. Lily and Maisie would whisper, their voices carrying through the thin paneling before bursting into raucous laughter. I'd squeeze my eyes closed tight and wish with all my might that I could be in that room with them, watching Maisie's freckled face light up before she hid her dimpled grin behind her hand.

She had been a mystery to me, and thinking about her now, she still was. Outwardly she was shy and blushed so easily, yet there was a grace and confidence that shone from within. On the days we mapped out an area in the woods and played hide-and-seek, if Maisie was the seeker, I knew I was in trouble. She was sure-footed and so light on her feet I never heard her coming. When ultimately she would find me, I was always surprised at how quietly and quickly I was found.

Maisie would giggle, swinging side to side, before declaring she always knew where I was and could always find me.

*Fuck, I wish she'd find me now . . . I'm waiting.*

She was extraordinary, and every woman I'd met since had fallen short in comparison. Maisie was my first love, and if I'm honest, my only love. After my parents had been ripped from my life, I'd closed myself off. Building walls so fucking high that Superman wouldn't have been able to leap over them.

In the days and weeks after my parents had been butchered, I had consoled myself by thinking that Maisie, my cousin Lily's best friend, would be a frequent visitor to their house. I would get to be around her, to be hypnotized by those eyes, one pale blue, the other a mix of blue and chocolate

brown, and the way she flicked her long strawberry-blonde hair over her shoulders. But she never came by to visit, and I never had the guts to ask Lily why.

I turned to look at the empty seat beside me and tried to imagine Maisie as a grown woman. That seat was reserved for her, the only person who would ever be welcome to sit beside me in my mom's black leather seat and join me on this crazy journey called life. I scoffed at my own stupidity. By now, she'd be married with kids, giggling at some lucky fucker's dumb jokes. It had been fourteen years, so why was I still so hung up on a childhood crush? Maybe it was because she reminded me of a time when life was measured by innocent discoveries. Or maybe she was a reminder of all that was good in a world that had turned to shit on the night I said goodbye to her.

Still, I couldn't deny that restless feeling of wanting more had been growing of late. It was something I couldn't shake no matter how hard I tried. But for now, I'd consider getting a dog as a companion.

Peeling off the worn red hoodie, I tossed it onto the empty seat beside me. The sun was hot, and the elbow of my left arm hung from the window catching the rays. I could drive this old girl forever, and as I listened to some classic hits from my childhood, I allowed myself to reminisce about my dad and his love for the black Chevy. She was ready for another tune-up, and that was another reason I was looking forward to reaching Kansas.

The other reason was family.

I hadn't lied to Kerry, but the people I was so looking forward to seeing weren't blood relatives, they were closer. Elizabeth and Albert, or Gran and Pop as I affectionately called them, owned a motel on the outskirts of a little backwater town. It wasn't anything special, in fact, the motel looked like something from the sixties. With two single-story buildings, each with eight rooms, they were positioned in an L shape with a single parking bay out the front of each. The peach-painted exterior had been updated over the years to ocean blue and then fern green, but the layout and general feel had remained the same. I'd stayed there the first time, at the very beginning of this crazy rollercoaster. Checking into a basic but comfortable room, I'd stretched out on the soft mattress while studying a map of the surrounding area. I was following the trail of a particularly vicious werewolf, and although I was new to this business, my gut told me the wolf was heading toward Kansas after three nights of death and devastation in neighboring towns. I had a month to kill before the next full moon. A month to hone my skills and gain the courage to face the beast head-on for the first time. The motel had been the perfect location to set up and wait. Perched on the edge of dense woods and only a mile from a large cattle ranch, there was plenty of food to hunt should the creature decide to feast on animals instead of people.

One day when I'd been out in front of my room, tinkering under the car's hood, Pop had passed by with a toolbox in hand. It was hot, like surface of the sun hot, and he had sweat pouring off him. His button-down shirt was soaked and sticking to his back, a dark gray trilby hat perched on his balding head, damp around the rim from perspiration. So, I offered to help. Pop was getting on in age, his back permanently stooped as he shuffled along, but still determined to keep up the maintenance on the motel himself, but after Gran told him to accept my offer and we brokered a deal of my services in exchange for board, he finally gave in and let me tag along. I spent the following three weeks with Gran and Pop. We fixed the plumbing in room seven when a motel guest tried to flush everything but the kitchen sink down the old pipes. We rewired some lights in room eleven when one guest had a little too much to drink and decided that the ceiling fan in their room could hold their weight as they tried to swing around, holding onto one of the fan blades.

There were holes in the wall to patch in room two after a family dispute where the police had to

be called. Seems the guy had tracked down his wife and kids after they'd run from him in the middle of the night. He'd kicked in the door and proceeded to lay into his wife while his two little boys cowered in the corner. I'd been in room one and heard the commotion through the paper-thin walls. Storming into the room, I pulled the guy off the most petite woman I'd ever seen as she shielded her face with bloodied arms, trembling in fear. He hadn't been happy and started mouthing off at me, telling me he'd beat the crap out of me as soon as he'd finished with his missus. I just smiled. I'd spent years learning Taekwondo, and that antsy feeling of waiting for something to happen had been festering for days, the need for physical exertion overwhelming. Needless to say, he stopped mouthing off pretty darn quickly.

From painting to gardening, there was always something to do on the motel, and in return, Gran and Pop welcomed me into their home. A meticulously maintained, quaint little cottage that sat proudly on the edge of the woods at the end of a gravel pathway, right next door to the motel. They were hard workers, rising before dawn and barely taking a minute's rest until late in the evening. While Pop's job was maintenance, Gran cleaned every room and changed and washed linens, her gray hair slicked back into a bun at her nape with never a hair out of place. She was a tiny woman, but fierce and full of energy. Every night Gran would call us in. We'd wash up and then sit on rickety chairs at the round kitchen table to a mouth-wateringly delicious meal. Gran was an outstanding cook, her specialty being pies of every flavor. Peach and apple trees grew down one side of the cottage, their limbs always heavy, bowing down to the ground with an abundance of fruit that Gran made good use of. I hadn't had that sense of belonging since I was eighteen and moved from my aunt and uncle's house, and it felt good to be part of a family again. They listened when I told them about my childhood and didn't judge when I let slip one night after a few beers on the front porch, that I believed werewolves had killed my parents. I'd noticed the look they had given each other, but they never mocked or told me I was crazy, and that in itself told me they were good people.

But what told me they were people I could count on was when I'd stumbled from the woods, my shoulder slashed and bleeding after facing off and finally defeating my first hunt, and Gran had hustled me into their home to dress my wound. With warmth in Gran's gray eyes and gentle hands, she had tended to my injury without pressing for answers. By the time my shoulder was cleaned and the slashes taped closed, Pop had moved my meager belongings into the guest room in their cottage. And that's where I stayed for the next week. They hadn't been blessed with children of their own, which was a great shame as they would have been wonderful parents. Eventually, the pain in my shoulder was little more than an ache, the scar tissue had started to form, and Elizabeth and Albert had become Gran and Pop.

I hadn't seen Gran and Pop for more than six months, and I knew this would be a fleeting visit, but I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face when passing the sign telling me it was only another hundred and twenty miles to Kansas.

I'd made good time and been lucky not to get pulled over for speeding on a number of occasions when my mind had drifted, and my foot had grown heavy on the pedal. But as I drew closer to the motel, my stomach sank. Something was terribly wrong. Gran and Pop had always taken great pride in maintaining the premises, but it looked run down and deserted. Images of an old western movie where the setting was a ghost town, complete with tumbleweed came to mind, and my gut churned with

dread.

The car door was open, and I was ready to jump out before my baby had fully stopped. Racing to the path that led to the little cottage, I noticed the garden beds were overgrown with weeds, and the house was in need of some repairs. The hinges on the gate creaked and whined as I pushed it open with force and barreled up the gravel path to the front door. I knocked loudly, paused, and knocked again. When I was about to turn and go in search of Gran and Pop at the motel, the lock on the heavy wooden door clicked, and the door pulled open.

"Gran! You're home. It's so good to see you." The smile that swept across my face at the sight of her was soon wiped clean. "Is everything all right?" I knew the answer before she had a chance to reply. The tears that sprung to her eyes said it all.

"Oh, my goodness." Shaky hands cupped her drawn cheeks. "Connor, I can't believe you're here. Oh, Connor." She stepped through the doorway and straight into my arms. Wrapping frail arms around my waist and leaning her head against my chest, her body shook as she sobbed. "I can't tell you how happy I am to see you."

She needed a moment, and I would give her as long as she wanted. I had seen Gran and Pop battle some hard times, both with their health and financially, but this was the first time I'd ever seen her seem so completely beaten, lost in grief, and without hope. Gran's frame was worryingly thin, my palm feeling every protrusion of her spine as I rubbed her back for comfort and waited for her head to lift before ushering her back into the house.

"Gran, what's happened? Where's Pop?" The living room looked the same as the last day I'd been there, neat and tidy with their two favorite chairs angled inward toward the hearth. Gran's side table contained her knitting and a used cup and saucer, but Pop's chair seemed . . . cold. There was no folded newspaper with reading glasses laid on top of his table. No scotch glass on a coaster, and I knew. I knew before she indicated to the floral sofa for me to take a seat, before a sigh that carried the weight of the world left her lips. Pop had passed away.

I looked down as Gran's weathered hands held mine. "He's gone." Two simple words that held so much burden. She patted my hands, comforting me when she had lost the singular person in her life that meant the world to her.

Squeezing gently, I stilled her hands as silent tears stained her pale cheeks. "How did it happen?" She shook her head and sat back on the sofa, dabbing at her eyes. "Wait. Let me make some tea and then if you feel up to it, you can tell me everything."

She nodded and released my hands, allowing me to stand. I knew my way around the tiny kitchen like it was my own. Within minutes, water was heating on the hob, and the cups and saucers were on a tray. Gran liked to use proper tea leaves, not quick and easy teabags. She said it tasted different and who was I to argue? So, I found a pot, measured out the leaves as she'd shown me, and waited for the water to boil. It was a simple undertaking, but I had to force myself to focus on the task at hand and not let my mind wander. My first thought whenever someone died was of my parents and their gruesome deaths. Had Pop suffered? Had his final moments been spent staring into yellow eyes, his pulse racing in sheer terror as he knew the end had come? No, I couldn't think that way, not about a man who I had admired and cared for.

Ten minutes spent making the tea had given Gran time to compose herself. When I returned to the couch, she still looked miserable, but her tears had dried, and she managed a closed-lipped smile. The tea was poured, and I sat back into the cushions, not wanting to press Gran for an explanation of how Pop had died.

Finally, after taking a sip from her cup, she spoke. "It happened just after you left the last time,

about six months ago now. Albert had been mending the roof. You remember the corner over room eight that needed patching?" I nodded. It had been on the 'To Do' list, but I'd run out of time and had to leave when another spate of killings had been reported in Florida. "He'd been up there in the heat, for nearly two hours, and by the time he climbed down the ladder, he looked beat. I told him to come in and rest. I'd made a fresh pitcher of lemonade." She smiled to herself, remembering. "He always loved my lemonade." Simple memories often held so much weight and tears glistened in her eyes. "So, I finished changing the linens in the last couple of rooms before I came in. By the time I was finished, he'd dozed off in his chair." She glanced over at the empty recliner. "At least I thought he'd dozed off."

"He never woke up?" I asked with a whisper, hoping that he had slipped away peacefully. There was a vicelike squeeze in my chest as I fought back tears.

"No. I tried to wake him for dinner, but he was stone cold." Her hand shivered, and she clutched it to her chest as though only moments ago it had touched Pop. "Maybe if I'd checked on him sooner, I could have done something." Tears were sniffed back. "But it was too late."

Wrapping my arm around her shoulders, I couldn't help but feel guilty. "I should have fixed that roof before I left. I'm so sorry, Gran."

"Oh, don't be silly, Connor. You have no reason to be sorry, it was his time. That's all. It was just his time to go."

"You should have called me. I would have come back."

"And what could you have done?" Gran pushed up from the sofa. "You have your own life to live. You can't be worrying about me." The cups were cleared, and Gran shuffled into the kitchen. "How long can you stay, Connor?" she called as the fridge door was pulled open.

I knew there wasn't much in there besides the milk I'd used for the tea, and some cheese and butter. "I can stay as long as you need me. Why don't I go to the store and pick up a few things?" Standing, I patted my pockets in search of keys. "And I'll cook tonight."

Dinner was basic meat and potatoes, and I watched as Gran picked at her plate, pushing the food around with her fork. "Sorry my cooking's not that great. I don't get into a kitchen very often."

"It was lovely. I haven't had someone cook for me in years." I laughed while scraping most of Gran's meal into the trash. "Really, Connor, it was very nice. I just haven't had much of an appetite of late." I could tell. She'd always been a tiny woman, but now she was skin and bone. I doubted a decent meal had passed her lips in the last six months.

We talked late into the night catching up on all the towns I'd visited. It was difficult to explain why I was always on the move, so I chalked it up to a combination of being restless and the desire to see every corner of this great country of ours. What else could I say? I had mentioned werewolves once many years ago and immediately regretted it. People didn't believe in werewolves, the same as they didn't believe in fairies, vampires, and unicorns, so the mere fact that I did made me crazy.

Whenever I asked Gran what had been happening at the motel, she was vague and changed the subject. At first, I thought it was because she didn't want to speak about Pop, but finally after pressing for information, her shoulders slumped. "Do you remember Douglas Bruer?"

"Sure. He's the guy who owns half the town." I sat up a little straighter. I'd met him once, and that was enough. He had two idiot sons who didn't take kindly to strangers which meant they had given me

a hard time when I'd first hit town.

"Well, he now owns the properties to the left and right of here." She paused, waiting for me to catch up. "He's told me in no uncertain terms he wants the motel and this house so he can own everything."

No way was that going to happen. "Have they threatened you, Gran?"

"Not really." She shrugged. "Not yet. It started as soon as Albert died. They were nice enough, came to pay their respects. Even brought me a casserole. But Douglas or his sons come by every week or so now, pressuring me, offering me more money." She spread her hands in wonder. "What would I do with money and no home at my age? I'm too old to pack up and start again. Still, the way it's going the motel won't be worth anything soon, and I won't be able to afford to stay." She sighed. No wonder Gran seemed so defeated; she was backed into a corner with no obvious solution.

My blood boiled. What kind of coward threatened a little old lady who was recently widowed? If he came around while I was here, he'd be sorry. "Promise me you won't sell the motel or the house." She shrugged her frail shoulders once again. "It's your home, Gran. Where would you go?"

"Connor, look at the condition of the motel, this house. I can't do it on my own." Tears filled her eyes. "Albert was the backbone of this place. Now that he's gone I'm barely getting by." Her hands went to her face. "But I don't want to sell. Where would I go?"

"You're not going anywhere. Lean on me. I'll fix everything up, good as new." Her nod was unconvincing. "Trust me, I won't let you down."

"I know you won't." She smiled through the tears. "You're like family to us, and that's why . . ."

"What, Gran?"

"That's why after you left the last time, Albert and I sat down and had a serious talk. You know we've never had a family of our own. No kids, which meant no grandbabies. But you're like family, Connor." She took my hand. "Albert loved you like you were our own, and I do too."

I squeezed her hand. I had always thought of them as family, but I never realized the feeling was so reciprocated.

"So, Albert and I, we went into town to see the lawyer." I still had no idea where she was going with this. "We changed our wills. All this will be yours"—she swept her hand around to indicate everything, then let out a little chuckle—"not that it's much. But I hope . . . *we* hoped that one day you would find the peace you've been looking for and make this your home."

I didn't know what to say. Knowing that they cared for me so much, made me feel like I had real family again. My parents had showered me with love, but since they had been snatched away from me, I had felt empty. As hard as my aunt and uncle tried, there'd been a hole left in my chest as I'd pushed everyone away, too afraid to let anyone in. But Gran and Pop without me realizing, had become the grandparents I'd never had. I only wish Pop was still around so I could tell him how much his belief in me meant.

It was after one in the morning when my eyes grew heavy. I stretched and let out a loud yawn, physically and emotionally drained from the surprises and events of the day. "Which room can I stay in tonight, Gran?"

"I'll make up the guest room for you, Connor." Gran groaned as she stood, clutching her lower back.

I jumped up. "I don't want to put you out. Besides, I've got some money, and I want to pay my way."

A throaty laugh escaped her as she shuffled toward the linen cupboard. "As if I would charge you for a room. You're family." Turning toward me, she indicated with her head for me to follow. "All the

habitable rooms are in use. The rest are in need of repair"—she sighed heavily—"but I'm sure you've already worked that out."

Taking the linen from her arms, I kissed her forehead before heading into the guest room to make up the bed. It was just as I remembered, floral and frilly, the perfect room for the little girl they never had. I folded the quilted bedspread and placed it in the blanket box at the end of the bed, swapping it for the thickest woolen blanket I could find. The room was cold, but I knew the radiator on the far wall would warm the tiny space in no time. Gran leaned against the doorframe, the corner of her mouth tipped up into a gentle smile. "Don't worry about the motel, Gran. I'll get on to the repairs first thing in the morning."

# CHAPTER THREE

I was making good time driving from Kansas to Colorado, pushing my Pontiac GTO until the old girl shook with complaint at not being treated with the respect she deserved. But I had to get out. I'd let my ravenous hunger get the better of me the night before and feasted on a herd of cattle on the property next door to the motel I was staying in. The cattle, grazing freely in the pasture while their owners were locked away safely behind closed doors were too easy a target, and with little success hunting the previous night, I was starving. On most full moons, I tried to keep to the woods, hunting for large animals like deer or bison where possible, or making do with smaller creatures such as foxes, squirrels, and raccoons. This meant my food source was unpredictable and as we neared the winter months, I needed to adapt and risk venturing closer to civilization and humans.

Not that I would ever prey on a person. Unlike many of my kind, I'd never overstepped my conscience, always brutally aware that while my animal nature took control for three nights a month, I was human for the remainder of the time and could never take a human life. The toll of waking to find I'd committed murder while out of control would be the final twist of the knife in my self-loathing. There would be no redemption.

As I'd crept closer to the farm and its livestock, the cattle had become restless, sensing impending danger. But I was agile with years of experience hunting in the wild and made quick work of taking down the first of several heifers with a clean swipe of my claws to the throat. In the frenzy of what swiftly became a bloodbath, I took my fill. With my mind hazy and heart pumping double-time, my thick, black fur coated with the intoxicating sheen of warm, sticky blood. There was no sating my appetite when food was readily available and with over a hundred head of cattle at my disposal, I was like a drug addict heading for an overdose.

With the sun peeking over the horizon, my eyes snapped open to the slaughter surrounding me. A still warm carcass pinned my left leg to the blood-soaked ground, and I heaved it to the side and slid my numb leg to freedom. Waking naked and drenched in blood, it took a few beats to remember the previous night's events and my location.

Kansas . . . I was in Kansas.

Scrambling to my feet, my numb leg now tingling with pins and needles, I made my escape by running along the tree line back to my room at the motel. Slamming the door closed, I braced my back against the cold wood while catching my breath. Dried blood covered my body, my face and hands

thick with coagulated goop that, in my human form, made my stomach churn. Stepping in front of the bathroom mirror, I was barely recognizable. Gone was the cute freckle-faced girl with the button nose. The only thing that stayed true to who I was were my unique eyes. With clumps of rotting flesh suspended from my mouth and down my chest, I picked it off and proceeded to fill the tiny silver bin beside the basin with solid matter. My strawberry-blonde hair, wild and matted, was clumped with mud and blood. I'd been reckless, my stupidity sure to make the news as soon as the property owners next door ventured out to their herd. Still, it was better the cattle than the lovely old lady who had shown me to my room and ensured I had everything I needed for my stay.

Turning the faucet to scolding, I stepped under the shower spray and watched the blood-stained water swirl down the drain, poking with my toes anything too large to wash away easily, and then tipped my face toward the showerhead to rinse the foul taste of raw meat from my mouth. I was a walking contradiction, fated to hunt and kill to feed my animalistic nature, yet loathing the taste in my mouth, the mere act of picking skin and fur from my teeth making me dry retch.

As I stood under the spray while the water finally ran clear, I wondered, not for the first time, how much longer I could go on. How many more full moons could I face alone and afraid, and tired . . . so, so tired. In the early days, I'd been a wreck after such a feeding frenzy, spending the next few days curled in the fetal position in a flood of tears hating myself for what I had no control over. Now, I was resigned to the fact that this was my life, and as much as I despised the hunting and killing, the blood and stench that crawled into my nose, down my throat, and through my hair, the thing I hated the most was I had no one to share it with.

I was a lone wolf in the literal sense.

I'd packed up quickly, taking the bin liner from the bathroom trash and ensuring all signs of blood were wiped clean. I knew I'd be hunting again in around twelve hours and would once again be washing the blood from my body while trying to cleanse my mind of the creature I was fated to be so didn't bother with drying my hair or applying makeup.

The setting sun hit me in the eye as I crossed into Colorado, and I flicked the sun visor down, squinting to make out the white line down the center of the road. I needed to shake the pity party and focus on where to set up for the waning moon, the final full moon of the month. I'd spent time in the area before maybe two years ago and had scouted the surroundings extensively. There were caves along a ridge a mile or so off the main road, so that's where I headed. My objective was to stay out of sight and undetected. That meant hunting small animals as even a ripped to shreds deer carcass could raise suspicions if found.

Parking on the side of a dirt track, I covered my pride and joy with branches and leafy foliage and grabbed my backpack from the trunk. The hike to the caves was through dense woods which made it ideal. There was no clear path and the canopy overhead blocked out the darkening sky above. When I reached the rocky ridge, I held back, allowing my instincts to survey the area and detect any other wild animals or people in the immediate vicinity. There was nothing, the area was clear, and I allowed myself a brief smile and sigh of relief as I entered through a low, narrow entrance that opened to a large and relatively comfortable dirt-floored cave. Doing a quick tidy-up, I stacked any loose rocks in the corner, clearing a safe space for my transition. The last thing I needed was to injure myself on a jagged rock as my body broke, contorted, and reformed.

It was no way to live. Hiding in a cave, cowering and afraid, but it was all I knew, and all I could afford. Staying in a motel had been a luxury when money was tight especially when my car was running rough and in need of a service. As I undressed, taking care to fold my clothes neatly and place them in the backpack, I made a plan to stay in Boulder for a little while. I'd lived there for a few

months the last time I'd come through, and I was sure if Maggie still worked at the diner in town, she'd find a way to give me a few shifts.

Waiting for the change to commence was the part I hated the most because every month I faced it alone. But it was a choice I'd made twelve years ago when I'd fled in the dead of night from the pack I'd been born into, and although being alone was, well, lonely and at times frightening, the alternative was far worse. As I watched shadows deepen into the cave and the sunset hues change to a colorless glow, I took a deep breath . . . it was time.

Agony doesn't go close to describing the tearing of every muscle, nerve, and vein in my body. As the bones in my arms and legs snapped, twisted, and reset I let out a muffled scream, it was like being run over by a steamroller and reassembled in a different form. My spine elongating was like knives slicing my spinal cord, the pain seared from head to toe. My usually short nails protruded from their beds into piercing, blade-like claws. With my vision blurred as my skull cracked and reformed, the metallic taste of blood filled my mouth as fangs split through my gums. Every sense was now heightened, my thick, black fur detecting the change in temperate and breeze.

It was time to hunt.

The sky was clear without a cloud in sight, and I took advantage of the glowing full moon and superior vision to scour the thick underbrush for any small mammals cowering in fear. The soft cotton tail of a gray rabbit caught my attention, and I gave chase. It ducked and weaved underneath low-hanging foliage and through hollow logs, but I was just as quick. For an animal as large and muscular as myself, I was light-footed and nimble, easily keeping pace. As I raced between tall moss-covered trees, the undergrowth thinned, and the rabbit had nowhere to hide. A second before I was about to catch my first bite of the night a foreign sound pulled me up in my tracks. No, not a foreign sound . . . a human sound.

"What the fuck is that?" The white light of a spotlight blinded me after my eyes were accustomed to running through the dark, and the click of a rifle stopped me dead as I came face to face with three men. Wooly beards, long scraggly hair, and baseball caps shielded most of their faces. Their eyes were huge in a mix of surprise and terror as one bravely raised his rifle with trembling hands while the others ran toward the pickup truck for safety.

In my focus to chase down the lowly rabbit, I'd misjudged how far from the cave I'd run and reached a clearing. There was nowhere to go except back the way I'd come. I stood to my full height and growled defensively while taking a step back. In a split-second decision, I started to turn and retreat into the dense woods.

I saw the muzzle flash an instant before I heard the shot—then felt the stinging heat pierce my skull. With an almighty howl, I blindly took off, the blood running in my eyes marring my vision. There was no letting up. If they were following me, tonight would be my last night as a werewolf. It was bittersweet and the thought of *maybe it was meant to be* flashed through my mind.

Diving back into the cave, I hunkered into the shadows, my heavy panting assaulting the otherwise silent cavern. There was nothing. No footfalls drawing closer, no torchlight swinging side to side as it entered the cave. The pain in my head was blinding. Although it was obviously a regular bullet as a silver bullet would have done more damage, the fact that it had penetrated my skull had me quietly whimpering. It would take time for the bullet to work its way out, and I would need food to build my strength and help speed up the healing process.

I didn't want to move but knew I had to. Just as I was drawing on inner strength to carry me back into the woods to hunt, the scent of fox and the fresh blood of wood rat was carried on the breeze. Dinner had been served. All I needed to do was go to the entrance of the cave to collect it.

Waking in the warmth of the cave, I stretched and gently touched my fingertips to where the bullet had penetrated my forehead. The blinding pain had dulled to an ache, and the hole had healed over. My werewolf blood afforded me significantly quicker healing abilities, and when injured in werewolf form it was even faster. Because I hadn't hunted a large beast—only the fox and its wood rat—there was minimal blood to clean up, so I pulled the water bottle from my backpack and rinsed off my hands and face, then swirled a mouthful around and spat it onto the dirt floor. Dressing and tidying my hair was next before I spied the bullet on the ground near the animal carcasses. I picked it up, inspecting the offending object that had caused so much pain, then flicked it toward the pile of rocks where it rolled out of sight.

The hike back to my car was uneventful, and I took the time to draw deep breaths of fresh air and play a little game I liked to call *name that scent* where I would let my sense of smell detect various animals in the area. I was quite good at it and could differentiate between foxes, rabbits, squirrels, opossums, and rats as well as an array of other critters purely by their unique scent. In my mind, I'd turned it into a game show with flashing lights and prizes to be won. All I had to do was name the last scent to win a vacation to the Bahamas. I chuckled, but my smile dropped when the last scent to hit me was human laced with heavy cologne and leather shoe polish. Slowing my step, I let my hearing take over. There were men at the clearing talking about . . . me.

As stealthily as possible, I skirted around the clearing I'd encountered the previous night and took a different path back to my car. It hadn't taken long for word to get out. By lunchtime, the woods would be teeming with sport hunters searching for their next prize kill.

Parking my Pontiac, I checked my reflection in the rearview mirror. I needed a shower but was presentable enough to call into the diner to say hello to Maggie who ran the place, and see if she needed any help for a few weeks. Maggie was always accommodating, never questioning me the last time I'd worked at the diner and needed a couple of days away when I'd gone off the grid to hunt during the full moon cycle. This time, however, I was on limited time. I needed to save as much money as possible to get my brakes fixed but would have to be back on the road before the next full moon. Now that I'd been seen by the hunters and had a news crew reporting on the sighting, if I was to hunt in the Colorado area again, I was sure to be caught.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# CONNOR

The aroma of bacon, along with the sweet smell of peach pie wafted into my room. Checking my watch, I was surprised to see it was after nine. I'd slept in, the first good night's sleep I'd had in God knows how long.

I'd missed the last full moon the night before, so overwhelmed with the tragic news of Pop passing that all thoughts of hunting had slipped my mind. It was disappointing that another month would pass before the shifter would strike again, but regardless, Gran would always come first.

Stretching, I scratched at my chin. The stubble was almost a beard, and if my hair grew any longer, I'd be able to tie it back. But I wasn't into the whole man-bun craze, and my face was itchy. I washed up, taking a few extra minutes to shave, and dressed in some old jeans, work boots, and a faded black tee that had seen better days. My mouth salivated for a big, cooked breakfast as I made my way to the kitchen. The tiny television on the kitchen counter was playing softly, and Gran had stopped, dishcloth in hand to watch something that had pulled her attention. Walking quietly to avoid disturbing her, I rounded the counter so the vision came into view.

"Seems there was some kind of strange animal spotted in Boulder, Colorado," Gran said, her eyes fixed on the tiny screen. "Look . . ." She pointed at the fuzzy footage playing. The creature looked to be walking upright as any man would, but its muscular hind legs and long snout were far from human.

I cursed under my breath. While I had raced to Kansas from South Carolina, the werewolf had been moving further away in the other direction. I'd missed it again, but at least I had some idea of the way it was going and where I needed to head for the next full moon.

The video, probably filmed on a phone, came to an end. "We have here with us the man who saw this strange beast. Was it Big Foot or something else? Let's find out." The reporter couldn't hide the sarcasm in his voice.

The camera panned past an old, dented truck surrounded by a sea of beer cans, to the reporter looking totally out of place in a sharp pinstriped suit. He held the microphone to the face of a man who couldn't look any less credible if he tried. I let out a relieved sigh. No one would believe this guy. He was huge, tattooed, with long filthy hair and a beard that appeared to have caught most of his last meal. Not that appearance was anything to go by, but sobriety was, and the beer cans would tell everyone that this guy had hallucinated the entire thing.

As he began to recount the sighting, I knew only staunch believers in there being 'something' out there would take note.

"Me, Cousin Chester, and Cousin Emit, we was deer hunting. We shone the spotlight on the bushes, and there it was, clear as day. It was like a wolfman, all hairy with big teeth and claws." It was like watching a play as the man who himself was big and hairy, acted the parts of both the hunters

and the wolf man. He was extremely entertaining.

"So, what did you do?" The reporter feigned interest.

"Well, we started shooting at it. I got it right between the eyes, but it didn't make a lick of difference. It done turned and like howled at us, then took off into the trees." He pointed toward trees. "Right through there."

"Did you see where it went?"

"I wanted to chase it"—he puffed out his chest—"but my cousins, they're chicken shit." He let out a toothless chuckle. "I looked a little ways into the woods, but it had disappeared."

"Just like that? Disappeared, you say?" The reporter took a second to look at the camera, smugness oozing from every pore.

"*Poof!* Just like that."

It was a legitimate sighting of what I knew to be a werewolf. But as the reporter crossed back to the studio of laughing newscasters, I also knew that this would be forgotten by the end of the day. Written off as some drunk hillbillies mistaking a deer or maybe a bear for a mythical creature.

"Do you think it's the same animal that was here only a couple of nights ago?" Gran asked, turning to face me. "You know, those wolf things you hunt."

My mouth opened and closed like a goldfish before finally managing a single word. "Probably."

She nodded. "I thought it might be. That's why you're here, isn't it? Because of the Bruer's cattle being killed the other night."

I couldn't believe she knew so much. What I do had been a closely guarded secret from everyone I met. Whether it was meeting a woman in a bar or checking in to a cheap motel, I would always use the excuse of just passing through on my way to visit relatives. It worked a treat every time and explained why I only stayed a few days before loading my rucksack back into the old Chevy and moving on.

Rounding the counter, I sat on one of the wooden stools. "How did you know, Gran? I've never told you I'm a hunter."

Gran smiled knowingly. "I wasn't born yesterday, Connor. It's what brought you here all those years ago, and what nearly took your life that night in the woods. I know your parents were killed and that changed your life forever. But more than that, I see the look in your eyes every time you hear of people being attacked by wild dogs, or animals like the Bruer's cattle being mauled. It's like you've spent the last eight years looking to avenge your parents' deaths." Reaching out, she briefly took my hand. "I understand it gives you purpose, but I worry that it will never be enough. That at the end of it all, you'll have nothing to show for your life."

I worried about that too. The house with the white picket fence was a distant dream. There had been times throughout the years of hunting when I'd promised myself just one more kill, and then I'd give it up. Find a little house, fix it up real nice and settle down. I even gave up hunting for four months at one stage and found a stable job in a garage, but then I caught wind of a family who'd been killed while taking a walk in their local park, and old wounds resurfaced. How could I let a creature destroy another family the way mine had been and do nothing about it? So, I got my weapons box from storage, loaded up the Chevy, and said goodbye to the life I had started to build for myself.

"Don't worry, Gran. I'll settle down one day, I just . . . I have a feeling about this one. It's different somehow from all the others, and I need to know why."

Her brow furrowed. "What do you mean different?"

"I mean, it moves differently. It kills selectively. It could have easily attacked those men last night despite being shot by a normal bullet, but it didn't. It ran away." I sighed. This was so difficult to

explain. “I just . . . I have a feeling about this one, almost like we’re connected. I don’t know”—I shook my head—“it’s a gut feeling, I guess. And I always trust my gut.”

Gran smiled. “What’s your gut telling you now?”

As if on cue, my stomach growled. “It’s telling me I’m hungry.”

# CHAPTER FIVE

# CONNOR

Straight after breakfast, I pulled the Chevy around the back of Gran's house and into the garage. Pop had every tool you could imagine, and over the years, he'd let me use them to keep my car running like the well-oiled machine she'd always been. But the car would have to wait. Gran was depending on me, and I had four weeks until the next full moon, so three and a half weeks until I needed to leave.

The only thing I had to ensure was taken care of was in the car's trunk. My antique wooden trunk with leather straps and brass fittings. It resembled a pirate's treasure chest but was much more valuable because it held my 'tools of the trade'. But these weren't your everyday tools that a plumber or electrician would use. No, these were unique antiquities and artifacts I'd collected over the past eight years. Using the large brass key, I unlocked the padlock and opened the lid. Nearly every spare penny I'd earned over the years had gone into the equipment in the heavily armored box.

Every town had at least one antique store, and I'd spent countless hours rummaging through dusty shelves or long forgotten boxes for any pure silver that could be melted down and fashioned into a weapon. Arrows were my weapon of choice. Knowing that only silver could kill a werewolf, my arrows were hand-crafted by a blacksmith in Texas who didn't ask any questions, and I never offered any answers. He would melt the silver I brought to him and make arrowheads that fit perfectly to the carbon fiber shaft. Anything from cutlery to hair burets, wine stoppers or buttons, his pure craftsmanship created arrows that fired cleanly from my crossbow. Over the years, they had proven to be lethally effective.

It was also surprising how many daggers used to be made from pure silver before stainless steel became a cheaper and more readily available material. I was old school and much preferred silent weapons over a custom-made silver bullet. Turning an exquisitely carved blade over in my hand, I told myself, not for the first time, that once this werewolf was disposed of, I would start living for myself.

Heaving the chest from the car's trunk, I half dragged, half carried it inside, and slid it under the guest room bed. Even though I wouldn't need it for another month, I felt safer knowing my weapons were close at hand. After checking the padlock twice for good measure, I went in search of a notepad and pen to write up a list of maintenance on a 'To Do' list.

The list of repairs was extensive, but Pop had been a great teacher, and there was nothing I couldn't manage myself with a little bit of time. I got to work unblocking drains, fixing holes in walls, and replacing a door lock that had been kicked open when drifters had broken into a room to escape the weather.

After lunch, I climbed up the ladder and onto the roof. This had been the last repair Pop had made, and some of his tools were still up there waiting for him to return. Corrugated metal sheets had

been riveted down where the leak had been but standing up on the old roof, I could see that the whole expanse above rooms one through to eight needed to be replaced. With fingers interlocked behind my head, I let out a low whistle. It would take a lot of work and a heap of cash to fix the roof properly, but maybe I could patch it enough for the time being until I next passed through.

From my vantage point up high, looking to the left, I could see the wire fence dividing Gran's property from the Bruer's. To the right, another wire fence ran along the boundary of the motel to separate it from more Bruer land. At the back, however, there was no fence, and I had no idea how far back into the woods Gran's land ran. No barrier between the motel and dense woods meant no protection from whatever was lurking, hidden from sight among the trees, and that had me on edge. There had been a werewolf only a mile away at the cattle ranch to the left, but it could have just as easily made its way to Gran's back door.

I gathered up the tools from the roof and went in search of Gran. She was busy in the kitchen, humming happily to herself. Stopping in the doorway to strip off my dirty tee and kick off my worn boots, I smiled at Gran's lifted spirits. She seemed a lot better than she'd been the night before and it gave me hope that she'd be okay once I left.

Whatever was cooking smelt heavenly, and I sniffed the air upon entering the kitchen. "Mmm, that smells good. What's cooking?"

"It's your favorite, roast chicken with rosemary and garlic potatoes." She grinned as I smacked my lips together. "You deserve it for all the work you've done today. I appreciate it so much, Connor. And I enjoy having someone to cook for."

No thanks were necessary, especially as there was still so much to cross off the list. "The roof's in pretty bad shape. I think it needs a complete replacement." Gran's shoulders slumped, but she didn't speak. "While I was up there, I had a look at the boundaries. How far back does your property go? There's no fence."

Gran stopped basting the chicken, pausing to think. "We used to talk about clearing some of the woods, but I can't recall the measurement. I just know it's back to the creek."

I couldn't believe it. The creek was miles back into the woods. No wonder the Bruer's were so keen to get their hands on it. I'd read up on the land around the area, and there were coal and zinc mines close by. Gran could be sitting on land that was worth so much more than the buildings on the surface. But what was more so at the front of my mind was the imminent danger of living so close to woods that when you looked out into it at night, anything could be hiding, peering back.

"You have to promise me that you won't go outside on a full moon, Gran." She rolled her eyes and continued basting. "I'm serious. I could never talk to you about it before, but you know the truth of what I do, so you know what's out there."

"Connor, I've lived here for most of my life." The chicken was returned to the oven. She was taking this far too casually. "I'm not going to lock myself away now."

Resting my hand on her arm, I turned her toward me. "Cattle were killed on the property next door. You need to take care, please, for me. In fact . . ." I paused, knowing she wouldn't like what I was about to suggest. "Before I leave again, I'm going to show you how to use my old crossbow."

Gran's hand flapped me away. "I don't need a crossbow, and I wouldn't know how to shoot straight anyway."

"I'll teach you and leave it here with some arrows. Please, Gran. I'd feel a lot happier knowing you could defend yourself should anything come out of the woods."

We chatted about everything except what was important as we ate. Gran needed to take me seriously, but I could see her point. She'd lived in the same house that backed onto the same woods

since their wedding day, and nothing had ever happened. Perhaps I was being paranoid. The chances of the werewolf coming back to the same location were slim, especially with this particular beast. But that didn't stop me from worrying. Maybe I'd put up a fence along the tree line before I left just to be safe.

Just when I thought I was getting on top of the maintenance, ticking half a dozen jobs off daily, it took a backward slide.

I'd worked my way through the first block of eight rooms and had moved onto the second building. The first three rooms had mainly cosmetic repairs. Some paint that needed to be freshened up, or a loose tile in a bathroom. These jobs were easy and could be ticked off in an afternoon. I'd replaced a door lock on room eleven when I'd first arrived as it was critical and reinforced the doorjamb to ensure it was safe for anyone staying there. Making my way toward the next room, which was room twelve, I had a spring in my step, confident I'd get through the work required to keep the motel running before I needed to leave. But my happy whistle was cut short when I stopped dead in my tracks. Both rooms ten and eleven had had their doors kicked in again overnight, the wood splintered and sticking out in jagged shards.

"What the hell?" I muttered under my breath, totally exasperated that this had happened again. Shoving the door of room ten open, I stepped back to survey the scene before entering. "Jesus." I puffed out a breath and entered the room, holding a hammer poised in case the person was still there and wanted to take me on.

Poking my head around the door and then into the bathroom, I could see the coast was clear, but they had left one hell of a mess behind. It took a moment to wrap my mind around what had happened. At first, I'd thought that someone had broken in to use the room for shelter, but this was no traveler needing a place to sleep. The room had been torn apart. Graffiti that read '*you're next*' was painted in bright red lettering that resembled blood, and I had a feeling that that was the point they were trying to make. The mattress was shredded. The bathroom sink was smashed in half and lying on the floor.

If the Bruers hadn't been hounding Gran to sell, I would be at a loss as to who may have done this, but I knew in my gut that this was them getting their message across. The damage to room ten was extensive, and the room next door was no better. It would take a week to get the two rooms back to a level where they could be rented. Sucking in a deep breath, I slowly exhaled, trying to calm the desire to go next door and beat the crap out of someone. I hadn't heard a thing from the cottage, and I guess that's why they had targeted the building furthest away. But from now on until I left, I'd be staying in the motel, so I was close by should the fuckers come back.

"Hey, Gran," I called, banging the dirt from my boots at the back door before entering. "Gran, you there?"

She was shaken. Sitting in her favorite chair, her hand gripped the over-stuffed arm of the recliner, all the color drained from her cheeks.

In three strides I was in front of her, kneeling so I could see her face. "What's happened, Gran? Talk to me."

"Douglas Bruer just paid me a visit." Nothing more needed to be said. Every muscle through my body tensed with fury and my fists clenched as I stood. "Connor, leave it, please. I'll be fine."

"You don't look fine, Gran, far from it." I wanted to rage, to curse and punch something. Pacing,

my hands went to my long hair, tangling it between my fingers. “What did he say?” I stopped in front of Gran, trying with all my might to settle my breathing and calm the racing of my heart.

Sighing heavily, her breath rattled. “It wasn’t so much what he said, but how he said it. It was . . .”

“Threatening?”

“More menacing. He said I’d never be able to keep up with all the work. That the motel would bankrupt me, and I’d end up homeless and penniless.” I knew exactly what he was referring to. He’d continue to have his sons vandalize and destroy the rooms until Gran had nothing left. “He said if I knew what was good for me, I’d sell now while it was still worth something.”

“Not a chance in hell, Gran. I won’t let him push you out of your home. Out of Pop’s home.”

"Oh, don't worry, my precious boy. I told him it wasn't mine to sell anymore." The glint in her eye took me by surprise, as did her words. “I told him the properties now belonged to my grandson, and if he wanted to persuade someone to sell, he’d have to speak to you.”

Gran was brilliant. If it was out of her hands, there’d be no point in them coming by to bully her into parting with the motel and cottage. “Oh, I’ll talk to them. I’m more than happy to tell Douglas Bruer where he can shove his offer.” In truth, I wanted to do anything but talk. It had been a while since I’d been in a good fight and beating the crap out of those two Bruer boys would do me a world of good.

“No need, I think he got the message.” Hauling herself up, she shuffled into the kitchen. “Now, how about some ice-cold lemonade?”

What a remarkable lady. She’d endured so much, especially over the last six months. “If you won’t let me pay them a little visit, at least let me make you more secure.” Gran cocked a brow, waiting for me to elaborate. “I’ll make a few calls this afternoon to get a price on security. I’ll have this place so wired with cameras and alarms those Bruers won’t be able to set foot on your land without the security company knowing.”

# CHAPTER SIX

D*ing!* "Order up!" Tony hollered from the kitchen as he placed two plates of pancakes with all the trimmings through the serving hatch window.

I scurried over to grab them. "Thanks, Tony, you're the best."

He gave me a wide grin, his eyes sparkling. "If you really want to thank me, you can stay a while longer. Maybe let me take you for that drink we've talked about for weeks." Hope filled his eyes as he awaited my response.

"I wish I could. Really, I do. But I need to get going." I shrugged, picked up the plates, and turned back toward the bustling diner. Weaving my way to the corner booth with their plates of food, I used my hip to tap a chair in under a table. Providing vague responses to people's questions had become second nature, and as much as I hated it at times, it was better than lying to someone's face. My mom had been a stickler for telling the truth or in our case, finding a way to skirt around it without outright lying.

I smiled over my shoulder at Tony's disappointed frown. He'd been persistent from the day I'd started, asking me out for dinner or a drink and, at one stage, to a concert in a nearby town. I'd thwarted all his attempts with a smile, not wanting to hurt his feelings but knowing I'd be leaving in a few weeks so there was no point in forming any type of relationship that would be difficult for the both of us to end.

Maggie had been my savior. She knew I was passing through and needed to bolster my bank account, so every available shift was offered to me first. It was a great excuse for not socializing with Tony or anyone else. With the Pontiac's brakes grinding every time I pushed down on the pedal, money was my main focus.

I'd taken to sleeping in my car in the diner's parking lot for the first few nights until Maggie arrived at work early one morning and knocked on my car window. She'd cupped her hands around her face and pressed them to the glass, peering in at my bent and uncomfortable sleeping position. I was of average height at five-foot-seven, but the backseat was still too short for me to stretch out my limbs.

"What are you doing sleeping out here?" she'd yelled through the window.

Steadying my heart rate after the shock of waking to Maggie's knock and face peering in at me, I took a moment to answer. "I, um, couldn't afford a hotel room." I shrugged. Maggie knew funds were limited, but I don't think she realized just how short I was. "At least I can't be late for work." Smiling through my embarrassment, I straightened my clothing and climbed from the backseat.

Maggie pulled me into a hug. "Why didn't you say something? You don't need to sleep rough. Stay with me, I insist."

"I couldn't possibly, Maggie. It's too much." I hated being an inconvenience to anyone and Maggie had already done enough by letting me work at the diner again."

"Well, if you won't accept that offer, we can compromise. The office has a couch and a tiny bathroom out back."

I went to argue, even that was too kind.

"Ah, I won't hear it," she said, holding her finger out to stop my train of thought. "You know I'm always here first in the morning to open up and prepare for the breakfast rush, so no one needs to know." She leaned in, giving me a sly wink. "It'll be our little secret."

Placing my hands on my lower back, I stretched out the kinks and twisted my upper torso from side to side. Three weeks on the office couch was a godsend, and I was eternally grateful to Maggie for the offer, but I was now intimately familiar with every lump and broken spring in that decrepit piece of furniture.

Maggie leaned her elbows on the counter, watching as I cleared the tables from the last dinner service and wiped the laminate clean. I knew my time here was coming to an end and it saddened me to think I'd have to leave this little pocket of stability among my usually chaotic life. I'd been on the run for so long, for most of my adult life. Not only trying to stay one step ahead of hunters who were forever nipping at my heels, but also running from my pack. I'd learned very quickly that pack life wasn't for me. Their archaic beliefs and rituals that in the confines of the pack were a rite of passage, were abusive and cruel to someone who had been raised in modern society. I couldn't do it. I couldn't submit and was too outspoken for their liking and was therefore treated more harshly than any other female.

So, I'd run . . . and I was still running.

Giving Maggie a quick hug, she slipped my tips for the night into my pocket and rubbed my arm affectionately. "I guess you'll be going soon?" she asked knowingly.

"What makes you say that?" I hadn't given her a timeframe, but I guess she knew I was never in one place for long.

"I can see it in your eyes. The way you look around like you're submitting everything to memory. I get the feeling you're getting ready to say goodbye again." She studied my face, reading my expression. "You could stay, you know. Whatever has you looking over your shoulder won't catch up with you here. We won't let it."

My vision blurred as my eyes welled with tears. Shaking my head, I sniffed back the emotion. It wasn't me, I wasn't an emotional person. I couldn't afford to get attached to anything or anyone, but Maggie had somehow wormed her way in. It was how I imagined humans lived their lives. They'd find a job, make friends, put down roots in a community and eventually fall in love, marry, and raise a family. That was so far removed from my life and my future it seemed foreign to me, but every now and then when I caught a little glimpse of what life may have been like without this curse, it made me wish for something more.

"We'll see each other again, Maggie. I promise," was all I could say. Staying wasn't an option no matter how much the idea appealed to me.

"I thought you'd say that." She hugged me again. "Just know, you're always welcome here, May."

"And you know, I appreciate everything you do for me every time I pass through town. But you're

right, it's time for me to head off."

"Where will you go?"

I bit my bottom lip in contemplation. "I think it's time to head back to Portland. I have some ghosts I need to face, and there are some lovely camping spots I'd like to visit now that I'm older." No one knew about my parents and the fact they'd been killed in Portland in the woods near the lake house I stayed in one summer when I was a kid. I'd never returned to the exact spot, and it had always haunted me. It was time to face my demons and put my parents and their deaths to rest.

Entering the office had quickly become like going home. My bag was neatly packed in the corner after Maggie had let me use the diner's washing machine and dryer to launder all my clothes. It was a relief to have a bag full of clean-smelling clothes after having to pick-and-sniff for so long to find something that wouldn't offend people around me.

Stripping out of my uniform, I carefully hung it on a coat hanger on the hook on the back of the door. My name tag was still pinned to it, and I thought twice about removing it, instead leaving it on the breast pocket as a sign that it was my uniform and I would return one day. Digging my hand into the pocket, I pulled out a bundle of cash. Tips were great at the diner and the customers always generous and appreciative, but from the size of the roll of notes, I could tell that this was far more than my share. Taking a seat on the couch, I unrolled the bundle on the cushion beside me.

Tucked inside the wad was a note from Maggie in her familiar cursive scrawl.

*May,*

*Don't even think about giving this back to me, you've earned it. Until we meet again, with much love,*

*Maggie x*

Smiling to myself, I counted out the notes. It was enough to fix my brakes and fill the car with fuel, far more than all the tips from tonight. Maggie must have dug into her own savings, and I had to stop myself from running after her and shoving the money back into her pocket. I needed it, and her generosity shouldn't be taken for granted.

Stretching out on the couch for the last time, I helped myself to the leftover, day-old muffins and cakes that had somehow found their way into the office, no doubt another gift from Maggie. Chocolate chip muffins were my favorite, but they always sold out first. Apple and walnut were second best, and there were two among the variety before me. Strange as it may seem seeing as I was crashing in the diner, it was a relief to have somewhere safe and warm to sleep at night, a roof over my head, food in my belly, and a hot shower every day. Some may think sleeping on a couch was slumming it, but this was luxury for me compared to some places I'd slept. Come tomorrow, it would be back to sleeping in my car and in caves on the nights of the full moon, so for one last time, I stretched out, adjusted my position to curl around the loose spring, and closed my eyes.

Tonight was the first of the three nights I would change into the beast I so desperately despised—the

night of the waning moon. Rising with the sparrows, I left the diner through the side door and tossed my bag into the car's trunk. Maggie's car was already in the parking lot, so I headed back in for one final farewell.

I knew hunters would be here, milling around the area where I'd been seen the month before, waiting to see if I was stupid enough to stay in the same place for another full moon. I knew some shifters were arrogant enough to live in a community and pick off the weakest at every opportunity. Heaven knows, my parents had done just that when I was growing up. They had been overconfident and had no hesitation in setting traps and feasting on human flesh. Whether in the various towns we called home or at campsites, they would hunt and kill whatever crossed their paths, no matter the species. Blatantly hunting in the woods near the lake house had been their demise when hunters tracked them back to their tent and shot them.

How do I know it was hunters? Silver bullets don't lie. They'd also had their canine teeth ripped from their gums, and for the life of me I never understood why.

It had been a valuable lesson. I never stayed in one place for more than a month, and never, ever, let human flesh pass my lips.

Colorado to Portland was too far to safely drive in one day, so I decided to spend the next few days in Utah. By day I would drive into town and shop for a few groceries, but right now I was heading as far away from civilization as possible. Big Cottonwood Canyon was an area I'd hunkered down in a few times and was picturesquely beautiful. There were a few campgrounds, but I'd stay clear of those, instead choosing to find a cave near Lake Catherine, a crystal-clear lake that was also my mother's namesake. I parked at Silver Lake Visitor Center, grabbed my backpack, locked the car, and started my one-hour trek through the dramatic alpine scenery to the magnificent rocky canyons.

My feet ached by the time I'd reached a suitable cave, far away from any sign of humans. The soles on my hiking boots were worn thin, barely providing any support or cushioning over the rocky terrain. Removing my boots, I rubbed my aching arches before clearing any rubble from the ground and setting up an area to eat, sleep, and transform. From the scents in the cave, I could tell it had recently been used by a cougar, the taint of blood telling me it had fed well. That gave me hope that I'd find a meal tonight. If not, I'd have to rely on the solitary blueberry muffin I had left for breakfast.

The lake was mirror-still, the water freezing. Whenever possible, I stayed near a water source so I could wash any blood and entrails from my body in the morning before dressing. A few times over the years, I'd had to rely on a water bottle to wash the evidence of the night before from my face and hands, then pulled a hoodie over my blood-matted hair so I could find a hotel and a hot shower. That wasn't ideal. My mismatched eyes were enough to draw attention to myself and make me memorable. I didn't need people remembering the weird girl with strange eyes being covered in blood.

The pull of the full moon called to me, although not as strongly as it would tomorrow night. It was the first of three moons that would cause my body to change against my will, and even though it was an event that haunted my dreams, I couldn't deny the anticipation of euphoria that filled my senses was indescribably magical the moments before the bone cracking began. If I could bottle that feeling and never go any further, I would gladly live on the edge for all eternity.

Undressing, I neatly folded my clothes and placed the garments in my backpack. I'd become accustomed to being naked in nature, but my senses were always on high alert in case anyone was to stumble upon me when vulnerable. Vulnerable, that was until I became the hunter and could turn the tables, the mere sight of me in werewolf form I was sure would have any man peeing his pants and running for his life. Positioning myself in the clearing I'd made in the center of the cave, I took a deep breath and turned my face toward the moon. A tingling sensation crept from my toes, up my legs, and

spread throughout my belly, filling me with a sense of power and oneness with nature. Every sense came alive. My smell and hearing amplified tenfold as those senses reached out with invisible tentacles in search of living creatures that could become my prey. Opening my eyes, my vision magnified, every crack, speck of dirt, and shadow clearly visible to the naked eye in this barely lit cave.

It was time.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

# CONNOR

Saying goodbye to Gran was harder than it had ever been before. After my first stay all those years ago, I'd only ever visited for a week or two at a time, and Pop had always been there to share a beer with on the front porch at the end of a busy day. This time, however, my visit was for longer, and without Pop there, Gran and I had spent every evening together. As she wiped a stray tear from her eye, I promised I'd be back soon. But for me, soon was a relative term. We both knew that I was heading to Colorado, but after that was anyone's guess.

"Stay safe, Connor." Gran's hug was surprisingly strong. "I don't want to read about you in the paper or hear your name on the news."

I knew what she meant, but I couldn't help chuckling at the thought of the last guy who had been on the news after seeing the werewolf. "If you do see me on the news, Gran, I promise I'll have all my teeth."

Her head went back as she laughed with gusto. "Well, if you don't have your own, you can borrow mine."

It was the perfect way to leave her. Happy and laughing. After another brief hug and kiss on the forehead, my itchy feet were telling me it was time to go. I'd checked, and double-checked the weapons chest in the trunk, and as promised, had left my old crossbow and a few arrows with Gran. For all her dismissal of me training her, she picked it up surprisingly quickly and had a great aim. The Chevy had been tuned, and the oil changed, just as my dad had shown me all those years ago.

Gran had insisted on laundering my clothes and mending any tears. She took special care with the red hoodie. It was old, at least fourteen years old but it was precious to me, and Gran knew it. Since the night it had been used firstly as a pillow, and then a cover to hide beneath, it had become a symbol of everything I worked toward. It was my hunting hoodie, and when it was on my back and zipped tight, there was a sense of purpose, an energy that coursed through my veins, giving me the strength to fight another day. Over the years it had become faded, the elbows worn, but Gran had religiously patched and mended it every time I visited.

Sliding in behind the wheel onto the polished black leather seat, I checked the best route to Colorado and what I hoped would be the last hunt. I could feel it coming to an end. Even though I couldn't quite put my finger on it, the urgency had lessened over the last year. As soon as this shifter was killed, I would come back to Kansas and help Gran run the motel. After all, to my surprise, it was going to be mine one day.

It was close to sunset by the time I pulled into a motel on the edge of Boulder that was a hive of activity, with a car parked out in front of nearly every room. It was two-stories and well maintained. The paint on the outside of the building looked fresh, and little garden beds outside each room gave it a homely feel. The owner checked the register and gave me what he said was the last available room.

"Is there an event or festival here over the weekend?" The motel looked decent enough, with a spectacular backdrop of the Rocky Mountains, but I'd never come across one that was fully booked unless something was going on in the town. "You know, my grandparents run a place like this back in Kansas, but I don't think they've ever been this busy." I knew it was a white lie, but I wanted to get on his good side, and what better way than to find common ground.

The guy, who looked to be in his fifties shook his head. "Seems there's a lot of hunters here and game shooters. Must be some sort of sporting club, maybe. Not sure, but hey, I'm not complaining." He chuckled as the key was slid across the counter, but I didn't share his joy. A lot of hunters could only mean one thing. As much as I'd love to think I was the only 'hunter' in town, it seemed there were a lot more of us out there than I'd thought.

Beside the reception counter was a wooden stand filled with maps and 'things to do' in the local area. Perusing the pamphlets on offer, I grabbed a couple with the headings of 'hiking tracks' and 'campsites' and tucked them into my back pocket.

"You know, if you're looking to see where that wolfman was spotted . . ." he paused, waiting to see if that was indeed why I was there. I nodded. He leaned in close, drawing me in. "Best take the second road to the left, about fifteen miles west. You can't miss it, there are a couple of trucks, some VW vans, and an RV set up there. Just go past all the vehicles and keep going until you hit a fork in the road. If you take the fork to the right, you'll see the exact spot about another mile in."

"How many other hunters have you told?" I queried, leaning in to match his stance.

"No one else. I figured if they can't find what they're looking for they'll stay longer. You understand what I'm saying. This business is tough, but you and me, we have to stick together." He gave me a wink to seal the statement. I hoped what he'd told me was true. It would give me the advantage I needed to track the beast without dozens of noisy men trampling through the woods disturbing any chance there may be to catch it.

My room was on the second story, and he directed me to park around back in the bay marked for my room number. Rounding the building, it hit me again how busy this place was with every parking spot taken.

The room was comfortable, and I spent a few minutes taking stock of how it had been set up and comparing it to Gran's. Now that I knew I had a vested interest in the motel, I saw this and probably every other motel I would stay in with fresh eyes. Taking out my phone, I snapped off a few images of the room, then went outside and took more photos of the exterior color, which was a Tuscan tan, and the garden beds. When I eventually made it back to Gran's, I'd be sure to show her all the photos I collected between now and then so she could get some ideas of new paint colors and ways to spruce the rooms up.

Changing into my red hoodie, army boots, and jeans, I took a look at the hiking trail map to trace the roads that my new friend at reception had mentioned, then locked up the room.

Exactly where I'd been told, there were trucks, VW vans, and an RV parked, with a barbeque grill fired up and a cooler overflowing with beers. Being what you would commonly term a loner, I'd never gone in for the crowd mentality of hunting together, betting on who would kill the creature, and generally comparing dicks. This wasn't a sport, and it definitely wasn't fun. For me, this was a driving force in my gut that compelled me to hunt down every last one of these beasts and eradicate

them so they couldn't destroy anyone else's family.

Not interested in stopping to socialize, I kept driving along the rough dirt road, carefully negotiating potholes, and past the groups of men drinking together before heading into the woods. It was a dangerous combination, alcohol and firearms, and yet another reason why I treated this as a business, not a game. Coming to the end of what must have been thirty or so vehicles, one very familiar beat-up 1970 Ford pickup truck with a shiny lockbox came into view. My old 'friend' ex-Deputy Roland. He stepped onto the road as I was about to pass and held up his hand for me to stop.

I wound down my window, the dirt from the road swirling into the car. "What can I do for you?"

"Hello, Red. I was starting to think you'd missed the news." His large, hooked nose poked in through the window. "There's still time to make a wager. We've got a pot of nearly six hundred dollars for whoever catches this one."

I scoffed. "And does the creature get the money if he catches you?" This guy was everything I despised, but as soon as the comment was out of my mouth, I regretted it.

"Sounds like you're on the wrong side, boy. I'd watch myself out there in the woods if I were you. There'll be a lot of rounds being fired. A lot of stray bullets."

Warning received loud and clear. I needed to defuse the situation as his beady eyes bore into me, totally devoid of anything other than bloodlust. "Well, let's hope they're all pointing at the animal so someone can catch it." He stepped back, giving me the opportunity to slowly roll up my window. "Good luck," I called, taking off at a snail's pace so as not to kick dust up at him and make the situation worse.

He waved me on, but the scowl across his face told me a few more beers down, and he'd be hunting me.

By the time I'd taken the righthand fork further toward the jagged rocky landscape and continued on another mile, there wasn't a soul in sight. Seems my new friend at the motel was good to his word and hadn't told anyone else the exact location of the sighting. The moon was on the rise, the rim visible over the mountains to the east which meant if the werewolf was still in these woods, it'd be midway through its transformation and at its most vulnerable.

From the information gathered over the last fourteen years, I knew that transforming to and from the wolf was excruciatingly painful for the creature so not only was it vulnerable, but it was more likely to howl in pain.

It was the howl I was listening for.

Scanning the area, I knew the direction the deer hunter had pointed, the trees easily recognizable from the news bulletin. There were dozens of tire tracks left by the news crew and too many boot prints to count, so I would have to let my instincts guide me. Hurrying to the locked weapons chest in the trunk of the Chevy, I pulled out a state-of-the-art crossbow and slid three handmade silver point arrows into the quiver that was mounted at the front of the bow. I always told myself that three arrows were enough. If I couldn't hit the beast with three attempts, then I deserved to be prey. But that didn't mean I'd go down without a fight. Fastening the weapons belt around my hips, I slid two long-blade silver daggers into their sheaths and another down the side of my right boot.

The moon was rising quickly. Without a cloud in the sky, the stars along with the full moon lit my path enough that I could see reasonably well, around fifty feet into the trees. I never used torchlight while tracking. A torch was like a beacon, warning the werewolf that someone was coming and allowing it to circle around and attack from behind, but I may still need one, so I fastened it to my belt. I'd picked up a pair of night-vision goggles from an army disposal store a few years back, so I rummaged in the box and pulled them out. Once the woods were thick, the canopy blocking the

moonlight, I would need the goggles. Fastening them to the weapons belt, I locked up the car, a hum of excited energy coursing through me.

The sounds of the woods were all around. Birds, insects, and nocturnal animals had started the night shift and come out of hiding. In the still of the night, the woods came to life. Standing perfectly still, I closed my eyes and listened. There was no sense of panic or warning in the sounds, and it told me there were no predators in the immediate vicinity.

The woods grew dense not far from the clearing where I'd parked my car, with heavy underbrush making any tracks difficult to see. Stopping every few yards, I crouched down low to check for signs that something light on its feet but larger than a deer had passed through the same way. This was what I loved, the thrill of the hunt spurring me on and every animalistic instinct of my own coming into play.

The deeper I hiked, the darker it became until finally I had to don the goggles to see. There were caves and rock crevices along the northern bank, so I made my way there as quietly as possible. If the deer hunter really had hit the wolf between the eyes as he'd claimed, maybe it had fled to a safe haven to heal. I needed to find some evidence that it had been in the woods other than a blurry video of what could have been a man dressed in a costume. As soon as I'd clambered over a ledge of rock and neared the first cave my hackles were up. It was here, or at least it had been, the unmistakable musky odor assaulting my nostrils and urging me to push on into the darkness.

Before entering the first cave, I nocked an arrow and released the safety. Despite their size, werewolves were quick, their reach exceeding even a six-foot-three man like myself. I needed to be ready to fire at the slightest sound or movement. I removed the goggles and pulled out the torch, then with all senses on high alert, I stepped into the cave. There was no point attempting to sneak up on the werewolf now. If it was here, it would have smelt and sensed me as soon as I'd stepped foot inside. The rocks at the entrance opened to a wide but shallow cave. It was empty, with a couple of small animal carcasses against the back wall that from the smell of rotting flesh, were about a month old. The cave could have been the home of a bear or mountain lion if not for the distinct musky stench of the werewolf. Still, I needed to be sure that it had really been here and not just passed by.

Around the decayed remains were clear footprints, and I crouched down to examine them in the dirt. There were five toes, but they were longer than human feet with claws at the end. I placed my hand into the print to gauge its size. This shifter was big, but not the biggest I'd faced. These definitely didn't belong to any big cat that may make the mountains its home, and they were the wrong shape for a bear. It had been here, and it had hunkered down in this very cave, possibly injured, and used it as a shelter and place to recuperate.

I kicked around loose rocks in the furthest corner of the cave, trying to find something more . . . and there it was. Hidden beneath a pile of rocks that looked too perfectly positioned to be an accident was a single rifle slug with dried blood and a tuft of wiry hair still attached. In the white light of the torch, I rolled the slug between my fingers before shoving it into my pocket. It had come here, fed, and waited while the round, which was a standard rifle bullet, had worked its way back out.

But it wasn't here anymore. In frustration I kicked the last of the rocks across the cave and exited. There was nothing more to see, and I knew in my gut that if it was still in the area, it wouldn't be back to this part of the woods.

Knowing that the night had left me empty-handed, I decided to use the torch to light my way through the thick underbrush of the woods back to the car. In the distance, a dozen torch lights shone as they drew closer. The hunting party must have started where they'd parked and were finally making their way to the caves, but they were too late.

*Bang!* A round sounded, echoing through the dense woods. “Idiots,” I muttered, sure I’d hear about a fatal shooting on the morning news bulletin. There was laughter as a row of lights flashed from side to side, and the hunters trudged through the woods. Then another shot, this time ricocheting from the rock face only a few feet from where I stood. “Hey,” I yelled, waving the torch from side to side. Raucous, drunken laughter erupted, filling me with dread. Immediately I flicked off the torch and pulled the night-vision goggles on instead. Planning to make a run for it should any more shots be fired in my direction.

“Hey, Little Red. Did you find the big-bad?” It was Roland, but he wasn’t with the line of men marking their path with torchlight. He was closer, shielded in darkness wearing a similar pair of night-vision goggles to mine.

“What the fuck, man? Tell your moron friends to back the fuck off.” Every muscle through my six-foot-three body was tense. If he wanted a fight, I’d kick the crap out of him, but having his hunter buddies take potshots at me was crossing the line.

“Oh, come on, boy, they’re just blowing off a little steam. They’re all wound up to see the wolfman.” He air-quoted ‘wolfman’ and I realized these guys weren’t serious werewolf hunters.

“Just tell them game over, or I’ll start shooting back.” I tapped the crossbow that was hanging over my shoulder.

He shook his head, a gap-toothed grin on his face. “Ah, lighten up, Red. They’re just having fun. Almost no chance they’d hit ya from there.” He sneered. “And no chance you could hit them.”

Sliding the bow from my shoulder, I squared off to face him. “I don’t need to hit one of them when you’re so close.”

His state-of-the-art rifle was raised and aimed at me in seconds. “Do you really want to go there, Red? My boys would fill you with holes. They may be drunken fools, but I’d put my money on two dozen drunken fools against one hunter any day of the week.” He wasn’t bluffing. I could see it in his eyes and hear the threat in his voice.

“If it’s my time, so be it. But I’ll be taking you with me, Roland.” I held my ground. If I backed down now, I would forever be looking over my shoulder.

He sniggered and took a step back. His voice was sinister as he said, “Another time, maybe.” Then he yelled, “Guns down, fellas, and get over here. This way.” The speed that the torches neared quickened as they fumbled their way through the heavy underbrush. “So, what’d you find, boy?” His voice was hushed.

I lowered the bow and slung it back over my shoulder but kept a hand near the long blade dagger on my belt just in case. “It’s already moved on.”

His step was surprisingly light over the rocks until he was beside me, sniffing the air. “It was here. I can smell it.”

“Yes, it was.” I hooked my thumb over my shoulder toward the cave. “In there.”

He scurried away, more intent on finding evidence than tormenting me. By the time he emerged from the cave, the line of men was upon us forming a half circle around the entrance and blocking me from leaving. The light from the torches made the goggles ineffective, and I lifted them off, hooking the strap back around the belt.

“Is the wolfman in there?” one asked.

Another waved his rifle in the air. “I’m gonna catch it.” The others laughed, the smell of cheap whisky emanating from their pores.

“Wolfman?” I scoffed.

Roland stepped up. “Yes, Red, wolfman.” He lifted his goggles, and I swear he winked at me.

“We were drinking in the bar last night, and nearly everyone knows the story of the wolfman who lives in these hills.”

These guys really were weekend hunters. Deer hunters, maybe even bear hunters, but definitely not werewolf hunters. They wanted to catch a wolfman, stuff it, and display their prize in a trophy room alongside deer heads mounted on a wall. They had no idea what they were dealing with or how dangerous it was out in the woods, and Roland was playing along.

“Maybe we spooked him?” I offered. “There are plenty of caves along the rockface. He could be in any one of them.” I glanced at Roland. He knew as well as I did that the creature we hunted was long gone. Probably halfway across the country by now.

They stomped away, tripping and sliding on loose rocks, their torches lighting up the night as if it were day. If the shifter really was lurking in the woods, it’d be laughing its ass off at how inept these fools were.

With no leads, I packed up my rucksack totally at a loss as to where to head next. I needed breakfast, so the local diner in town was first on my list. From there I’d work out a plan. I always did once my stomach was full.

Knowing the shifter had been here the month before taunted me. It was one step ahead once again and this month, for the three full moons—waxing, full, and waning—there had been no reports or sightings. The internet was a powerful resource, and I’d spent every day at the local internet café, searching websites managed by believers for any hint as to the creature’s whereabouts. But there was nothing new. They all seemed to still believe it was in Colorado and focused every blog post on the sighting and blurry vision of the drunk deer hunters.

Stepping from the shower, I wrapped a thin white towel around my hips and swiped my fist across the mirror to clear the fog. Who had I become? The lines around my gold-flecked eyes and across my forehead were premature for my age, showing the years of stress and living on the road were taking their toll. Fisting my hair at the nape, I gave in and tied it back from my face. “Well, don’t you look pretty?” I told my reflection, mocking the little ponytail.

“I think it looks sexy,” a soft voice said from the bathroom doorway.

I swung around to find a girl who looked barely legal ogling me. She was dressed in tiny shorts and a tight, pink t-shirt with an ice-cream image captioned ‘lick me’. “Can I help you?” I asked, brow cocked.

She stepped closer, bold for someone so young. It obviously wasn’t the first time she’d let herself into someone’s room. “I’m here to change your linen.” Her breath felt cool against my still damp chest. “Can I take that towel?” She signaled to the towel still wrapped around my hips, the only thing standing between decency and possibly ending up in jail.

“So, you work here?” I took a step back, my ass bumping the sink.

“Daddy owns the motel. I like to help out, make sure the guests are happy.” She raised her hand to touch my chest, but I grabbed her wrist before she could make contact.

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen . . . in a few months.” She chewed her bottom lip, her lashes fluttering.

I smirked and dropped her hand. “That’s what I thought.” Grasping the towel to prevent any accidents, I squeezed past her and out of the bathroom. “If you want to help out, you can point me in

the direction of the best diner, a gym, and a barber."

She pouted. It was the only thing that hadn't been calculated and staged since she'd snuck in fifteen minutes ago. With shoulders slumped in defeat, she half-heartedly waved her arm toward the main road. "Just follow the road. Everything in this shithole of a town is that way."

The diner was like every other, and I smiled, already knowing what the décor would be and what I'd be ordering without needing a menu. In the front window was a sign stating *waitress wanted* and I wondered if 'jailbait' would be better off working here than in motel rooms where a bunch of lonely, drunk men were staying.

A few of the hunters from the night before were seated in a large booth to the left as I entered, I decided to take up a stool at the counter where I could see the television screen. They were noisy, clanging crockery and hollering for the waitress, a lady who appeared to be in her sixties, to fetch more coffee.

She huffed and puffed, shuffling around behind the counter for condiments and a fresh coffee pot before racing back to their table. I looked around. Besides the cook who was busy on the grill, there was no other staff.

Finally, she came back, red-faced and flustered. "Sorry, hun, what can I get you?" She poured coffee and slid a cup filled with sweetener packets to me, waiting for my order.

"I'll have the works. Bacon, eggs, sausage, tomato, mushrooms, hash brown. You name it. Throw it on the plate." I grinned, and she chuckled. "And don't stress, I can wait if you're busy."

Her entire demeanor relaxed, and she smiled. "You have no idea, honey." She indicated to the sign in the window. "I had a lovely girl here, but she up and left a few days ago. She's a traveler, a drifter, I guess. She's been all over the place and worked here a couple of years ago but was just passing through from Kansas."

I'd been listening to be polite, but the mention of Kansas had my full attention. "Really? Did she say where she was headed next?" She frowned, and I realized I probably sounded like a stalker. "I'm traveling a lot too. Always looking for new places or recommendations."

She nodded. "I think she said Portland. Seems to like camping in the woods and there are some pretty camp spots there she said."

Oh, this was too much. A drifter who'd come here from Kansas and liked camping in the woods. But a girl, I wasn't expecting that. Could the werewolf really be a girl who works as a waitress in crappy diners to pay her way?

"That's funny, I have family in Portland I was thinking of visiting." In truth, I'd never wanted to go back to Portland or the lake house after my parents had been killed. After the night that changed my life forever, my aunt, uncle, Dylan, and Lily had gone there a few times for vacations and to pack things away. But for me, the once carefree and laughter-filled place only brought back memories of that one night. So instead of holidaying with my extended family, I would find a friend from school who was willing to let me stay with them.

Maybe it was time to go back. To face my demons and make this the final kill I needed. To bring the direction my life had taken after losing everything I loved full circle.

"Well, if you see her, say hi from Maggie." She grinned. "Her name's May."

# CHAPTER EIGHT

With nothing to keep me in Boulder, I made my way back to the motel to grab my stuff and check-out. Having a lead that no one else had, especially Roland, had me whistling a happy tune as I pushed open the door to my room.

"Well, it's about time you came back. I've been waiting."

My happy mood was quickly replaced by a mixture of annoyance and amusement at the sight of 'jailbait' in my bed, wrapped in a sheet. "What are you doing here?" I tossed the room key on the little table by the window.

She spoke as she moved to sit up. "I thought you might like some company."

I held out my hand. "Don't get up." She bit her bottom lip. "I'm not staying." The twinkle in her eye extinguished and I couldn't help but feel sorry for her. Running my hand through the back of my hair, I took a moment to choose my words. "Look, I'm sure you're a really nice girl, but I'm not looking for"—I indicated to the bed and her in it—"this right now." *And I sure as hell don't want to go to jail.* Striding over to my bag that was packed and ready to go, I could feel her eyes follow me.

"Take me with you," she pleaded. "Please, Mr. Walsh, I need to get outta here."

*Mr. Walsh? When did I become my father?*

"Kid, if you really want to leave"—her eyes were as big as saucers thinking I was her escape route—"there's a job open for a waitress at the diner. You know the one where Maggie works?" She nodded, confusion all over her face. "Go down there and ask for the job. Beg if you have to. Then when you get it, work twice as hard as you need to. Turn up ten minutes early every day and leave ten minutes later than required. And save every tip you get."

"But . . ." Her bottom lip trembled. "It'll take years to save enough to get outta here."

I slung my rucksack over my shoulder. "Yep, it probably will. But if you want to do it, do it on your own. Don't owe anyone anything." With my hand on the doorknob to leave, I turned over my shoulder with one more word of advice. "And keep your legs closed. If you end up seventeen with a kid, you'll be stuck here forever."

Utah looked to be about an eight-hour drive from the outskirts of Boulder, so that was where I headed. I was happy to be on the open road again, but the buzz I used to get from driving and 'living the life' had lost its shine. Maybe I just needed a break. Maybe the fact I'd been chasing this wolf for eleven moon cycles had me jaded. All I knew was after this kill, I'd head back to Gran's and help her out for

a while. With any luck, I'd catch the wolf this month so I could make it back to Kansas for Christmas. It would be the first Christmas without Pop, and I didn't want Gran to be alone for it.

She was never far from my mind, and I worried that even with state-of-the-art security, Douglas Bruer and his moron sons would push Gran to the limit. I really needed to be there to take care of things and take care of Gran. If anything was to happen to her . . .

I couldn't think like that. My focus had to be clear to get this job done, but as soon as I turned my focus to the wolf, images of all the girls I'd met in waitress uniforms came into mind. Every girl who had served me in a diner over the last year could have been the creature I was chasing, and I'd not realized. Knowing how cunning they could be from past experience, I kicked myself for not taking more time to notice details. Maybe a scratch or injury on their skin from running through the woods. Maybe an animalistic glint in their eyes or slight musky odor as they walked by.

Hell, most of the thirty-four werewolves I'd hunted and killed had been male, with only a few being their female partners. But a young girl? I shook my head. How did she end up this way and on her own? Very few attacks left a strong male victim alive, so it was doubtful she had been turned, but if she was there would be a scar from the bite that inevitably turned her. The only other explanation was that she was born to two wolves. I swiped my hand down my cheeks. Purebred was rare and becoming rarer as the species was eradicated. Born into a family of werewolves, from what little literature I could find, meant that at the onset of pre-puberty, their bodies would not only go through the normal human changes, but they would also see signs of werewolf traits surfacing. Angering quickly and easily was one that was common and the most widely documented. Fights at school, vandalism, and general acting-out were the first signals to watch for during pre-pubescence.

Finally, the first transformation would be at puberty, after around two years of those first telltale signs that authorities chalked up to bad parenting and lack of discipline. In pureblood werewolves, it seemed to be something that was held as a rite of passage. It was celebrated as much as the Jewish faith celebrated Bar Mitzvah for their boys as they became men.

But if she was pureblood, why wasn't she with a pack? I knew about packs having stumbled upon a few over the years. I'd taken note of their locations and tried to assess their numbers. Just thinking about them had my jaw clenching. The chance to wipe out thirty, fifty, even a hundred at once was a glorious idea in theory, yet the packs generally weren't the problem. They kept to themselves and functioned as their own close-knit community well hidden from the closest towns and civilization. They had structure, and feared hunters as much as we had a healthy respect for them. Taking down a pack was never on the cards for me as a lone hunter, and as much as I loathed the species, I would never tell Roland and his gun-happy mates of a pack's location.

The more I thought about this girl, May, the more I wanted to get to Portland and find her. It had lapsed my mind to ask Maggie in the diner what May looked like. So excited at the prospect of knowing her new location and having a lead that she could potentially be working in a diner, my mind had raced in a million different directions at once.

Our conversation had been cut short by the hunters who called her over for every little thing, and she'd been sidetracked and never resumed our chat. But at least I had this much of a clue.

Roland had entered the diner as I was finishing up. He looked worse for wear and stunk to the high heaven of last night's whisky. He'd given me a courteous nod, and I'd returned the gesture. Seemed we were back to being civil again after nearly coming to blows the night before. That was fine with me. He was a little weasel of a man, and I had no time for squabbles when at any time we could be in the same thick woods in the middle of the night, both with loaded weapons. No, if I was going to be taken down by anything in the woods, it wouldn't be an aging ex-deputy with a pot belly

from too much beer and fried food. I would be bettered by the thing that I had been chasing.

Utah never failed to take my breath away. I'd passed through at least half a dozen times at every time of the year, and summer, winter, spring, or fall, it made my jaw drop at its beauty. I turned off the highway and headed to Ogden. It was one of my favorite towns to stop at, not only for the scenery but for Utah, the nightlife was surprisingly wild.

I found a motel that looked a little worse for wear but would do for one night. I wasn't planning on spending much time there anyway. After a shower and shave, I reluctantly tied my hair back and cursed under my breath for not spending an extra twenty minutes in Colorado to get it cut. I'd missed the wolf again, which meant I'd missed the thrill of the chase and fight. I was antsy, wound up with energy that needed to be expelled with either a fight or a warm, soft body.

Pulling on my best dark denim jeans, lace-up shoes, and button-down crisp white shirt, I checked myself in the mirror. "Well, that's as good as it gets," I told my reflection. I'd never had any trouble getting a girl's attention, whether I wanted it or not, but for the life of me I couldn't understand why. Sure, I was tall and muscular from years of physical activity and working out. It was one thing that I did religiously either in a gym, or with makeshift weights and resistance training of my own doing, but I wasn't a pretty boy like you see in the magazines and on cologne commercials. My eyes were light brown with gold flecks, my jaw square, and lips full. But years of living a life of hunting and fighting for survival had left me with what some might call wisdom behind my eyes. There was no carefree, easy-going smile. I knew too much. I'd seen too much, and it showed on my face.

By nine-thirty, Twenty-Fifth Street was lit up like Christmas, its bars and clubs pumping music into the street as patrons spilled from one bar and entered another. Architecture was always something I'd had an interest in and had I not chosen this lifestyle, maybe I would have studied it at college. I'd seen many styles on my travels, but the neoclassical style of this area was one of my favorites. With the white-capped mountains in the background, towering over the town, it really was beautiful.

I found a bar that wasn't too crowded and walked straight in. Music played but not so loud that you couldn't hear yourself think or talk without shouting. There was a tiny dance floor off to one side, but it wasn't the focal point which was great because I wasn't into dancing. Behind the long oak bar was a pretty girl dressed in a black t-shirt and shorts. Her straight dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, swung from side to side as she moved around, reaching for top-shelf liquor and pouring drinks.

I took up a seat at the end of the bar. Over the years I'd stopped chatting up girls in bars and buying them drinks. It was expensive, and I was short on funds, so I'd adapted. Girls who worked behind the bar were usually far more interesting, and by the end of the night weren't passing out or throwing up on my shoes but instead were giving me drinks for free.

"What can I get you?" she asked with a dimpled smile.

"Shot of Beam and a Budweiser, thanks." I gave her a half-smile. She nodded, a blush rising up her neck as she turned to grab the bottle of Jim Beam from the shelf. And then I saw it. "Damn," I muttered. A small solitaire diamond on her left ring finger caught the light and sparkled straight at me like a warning beacon. This one was off-limits. No matter how questionable my morals had become, I never hit on a girl who was taken, it just wasn't right. Looked like I'd have to go on the hunt after all.

I stayed at the bar and from my vantage point, surveyed the area. Finding a woman in a bar wasn't

dissimilar to hunting a wolf. Find the right location and the right time of night. Scour the area for clues such as a noisy group of girls out for a good time, assess the situation, and choose the best weapon, or in this case best approach, to complete the mission.

A crowd of guys standing around in the far righthand corner piqued my interest. There was either a sports game playing on a TV I couldn't see, a drinking game, or a group of girls that the guys were still too sober to approach.

Taking my drinks, I flicked the barmaid a ten-dollar bill, threw back the shot, and grabbed my Bud. The guys looked young, and the closer I got, the more I chucked under my breath. A group of maybe eight college guys was standing around, talking too loudly, and laughing even louder, trying to gain the attention of a bachelorette party, complete with sashes that clearly labeled the bride and bridesmaids. The girls were doing shots of some green liquid that looked like slime in a glass but was probably Midori, with empty glasses strewn across the table, some upright, some on their sides. They looked wasted . . . all except one.

*Designated driver*, I thought. Poor girl gets to go to the party but has to watch her friends have all the fun. Just as I was observing the reaction of the only girl sipping water, her eyes lifted toward me. I smiled. It was a casual smile, but with all the attention focused on her friends who were getting rowdier by the minute, a casual smile that showed someone was paying her attention was all it took.

I raised my beer to her, and she raised her bottle of water and shrugged. She looked bored and I felt sorry for her. Changing tactic for the night, I cocked my head toward a table that had become free and strolled over. I knew she'd follow, she looked desperate to be away from her friends who were only one shot away from dancing on the table.

She was dressed like the others. Short skirt, lowcut top, and heels like stilts, but she didn't look entirely comfortable in the slutty outfit. Sliding into the chair across from me, she smiled shyly and flicked her shoulder-length dark curls from her face. "Thank you for saving me." She glanced over at the crowd of boys around her friends. "I'm Violet. It's my cousin's bachelorette party, and I guess she thought she had to invite me."

"I'm Connor, and I'm always happy to rescue a pretty girl." She giggled, covering her mouth with one hand. "You looked a little out of place over there."

"I did?" Her eyes widened.

"Yeah, there was no Midori spilled down your cleavage, and you weren't raising a glass to every song that came on and then singing the wrong words."

She laughed. "I guess they are pretty wasted." Raising her bottle, she took another sip of water. "I'm designated driver, which is fine. Someone has to stay sober."

"So, you can't have one drink with me?" My beer was almost empty, the least I could do was buy the girl one drink.

"Well, to be honest, I don't drink alcohol." She took another sip from her bottle. "I guess that's why I'm always driving." She shrugged. "I have to work tomorrow anyway."

"Really? What do you do?" I hated the small talk, but it was a necessary evil.

"I'm a florist. Tomorrow is market day, so I'll be up at dawn to buy the best blooms."

"You're a florist, and your name's Violet? It's a match made in heaven." Her cheeks flared red, and I leaned in toward her. "So, you have to get up at dawn. Does that mean you can't have any fun?"

She bit her bottom lip. "I'm not totally boring. I can have fun." Leaning forward with elbows rested on the table, her ample breasts nearly spilled out of her top. "What kind of fun would you like to have?"

The bathrooms were down a dimly lit hall, men's on the left, women's on the right. I pulled her

gently to the left but the tug on my hand to go right won over. The stalls were tiny, but the mandatory ambulant stall was free. She was fierce. The shy girl had been left in the bar, replaced by someone who wanted a story to tell her friends in the morning. Tugging at my jeans, the button and then zipper were undone, and she was on her knees in front of me before I'd locked the door. My back hit the cold tiled wall, and I steadied myself. Long, firm strokes worked me from base to tip, and I watched, a hunger to see her devour me all-consuming.

With a flick of her gaze up at me, she ran the tip of her tongue around her pink-stained lips before sliding those wet lips over me. "Ah, yes," I hissed through clenched teeth. "Deeper." She willingly obliged, her mouth and hand working in perfect unison over my hot shaft, pumping up and down with vigor.

A couple of girls came into the bathroom, but that didn't stop her as she hummed around my cock, sending the vibration through my body. It had been too long, and the sensation was building too quickly. Lifting her chin with my finger, I wretched my wallet from my pocket and flicked her a condom. With adept ease it was on, her strokes rolling it down before she released me and stood, chest to chest. She was pretty with dark brown eyes that gazed at me expectantly. I kissed her softly on her swollen lips, then harder on her neck inhaling the subtle scent of roses. She groaned, throwing her head back and clutching my shirt for balance. My hand slid up between her thighs to find her slick center. She was already wet and ready for me. Tugging her underwear to one side, I dove my finger straight into her. She bucked, grasping ever tighter to my shirt.

"You like that?" I murmured in her ear. Taking the lobe and nibbling it.

"Yes, Connor. I want more."

There was giggling outside the door. Girls were listening which made me harder.

Grabbing my rock-hard cock, she pumped it with her hand. And I returned the favor, wrenching her skirt up and sliding first one and then two fingers as deep as I could over and over again, my thumb circling her swollen nub at the same time.

"Fuck me, Connor," she pleaded.

Gripping her shoulders, I swung her around slamming her back against the wall, and lifted her by the thighs. She gripped my shoulder firmly with one hand and braced herself against the tiles with the other, and I lowered her onto me. It was purely physical, my only focus a release that would abate the ever-present tension pulsing through my body, if only for a moment. I thrust harder as she bounced up and down on me, her chest rubbing against my face, my biceps and forearms straining to keep her balanced and maintain momentum.

Sharp fingernails dug into my scalp as she forced my head back and devoured my mouth with hers. I shook my head free, choosing instead to suck on her neck, her chest, anywhere I could reach from the current position. She tried again to grasp my face and kiss me, but it wasn't that kind of sex.

"Bend over," I growled, lifting her from me and taking a step back. She obliged, with hands planted on the toilet seat, ass in the air. I grabbed her hips and sunk into her, letting out a throaty groan. "That's better." With eyes closed and head thrown back, the pace was punishing. Her moans and the growl in my throat echoed from the tiled walls, the sound of slapping flesh adding to the symphony. It was over in no more than fifteen minutes. The release that ran through my body allowing me a few moments of peace as the storm that raged inside abated. Violet straightened her skirt, her legs shaky as she tucked in her top and finger-combed the messy tendrils of her hair. Flicking off the condom, I tucked my still semi-swollen cock into my jeans and zipped up. I couldn't get out of there quick enough.

I'd heard girls outside in the main area of the bathroom but was too focused on the task at hand to

pay much attention. As soon as the door to our stall opened, we were greeted with a round of applause and wolf whistles. I dropped my chin to my chest, glancing up from under my lashes and chuckling as I made a hasty exit. But Violet soaked up the attention, giving them a victory fist pump and bow. I didn't stick around. Turning to look over my shoulder, I offered a quick wave to Violet who seemed more than happy to blow me a kiss and return to her bachelorette party crew.

# CHAPTER NINE

# CONNOR

I was up at dawn, the briefest of thoughts passing to Violet and her flower market. I chuckled. It was always the quiet ones you had to watch out for. While all her friends were making spectacles of themselves, little Violet, the sober florist, was banging me in a filthy toilet stall. In my mind, it was the best way to do it. No awkward morning after, no even more awkward small talk to fill the empty space that was left after realizing you'd just done the most intimate thing possible with a complete stranger.

Portland looked to be a thirteen-hour drive, and I could do it easily in a day. I'd driven fourteen hours to Kansas from South Carolina without a break, but I would virtually be passing through Idaho, and I had an old friend in Jackson who I hadn't seen in far too long.

Jackson was pretty, even in late October when the temperature began to plummet. The mornings were crisp and clear, the air fresh, unlike the big cities I'd visited. I'd always been fond of the architecture and the people, so much so that when I'd taken a break and tried to live a normal life as a mechanic, it was the town I'd chosen. Benny's Auto Repairs and Maintenance was where I'd found the only steady employment I'd ever had, and it was my first stop. Benny had been good to me, letting me work on the Chevy in his shop and use his equipment outside working hours. Leaving had been hard, but he'd told me if I ever wanted to come back, there'd be a job for me. I had no intention of settling down and taking him up on the offer. When the time was right, I'd be lying roots in Kansas, but he was one of the few people I'd met in my life that I considered a friend.

Two cars were up on hoists as I pulled into the waiting area to the side of the garage. Benny's wasn't the only garage in town, but he looked out for his customers and always did right by them, and because of that they kept coming back. He was a good guy. If your car needed repairs, he'd shop around and get the best price for parts, and if it didn't need repairs, he didn't fabricate a problem just to screw you out of a few bucks.

Under one hoisted car was a young kid, no older than fifteen or sixteen. Under the other, checking the axle and wheel alignment, was a man in his forties who was as tall as me but skinny as a twig, wearing a backward NYC baseball cap covered in oil stains. That was Benny.

"Hey, Benny," I called, entering the garage.

He looked over, hands still in position holding a wrench above his head. "Connor!" He dropped the tools to the ground and strutted over, wiping his hands on an old rag that hung from his pocket. "Oh, man, I haven't seen you in . . . forever." He shook my hand vigorously. "You're looking good." He pointed to the ponytail. "I like what you've done with your hair," he said sarcastically. "It's very . . . pretty." He gave me a wink before breaking into a full belly laugh.

I laughed heartily. "Fuck off, Benny. At least I've got some hair." I pointed to his cap. "Still trying

to hide your bald spot?"

He laughed and flipped off the cap to show a completely shaved head. "Nah, I gave up on that about a year ago." He ran his hand over the smooth surface. "Rachel thinks it looks sexy like this."

"Well, anything to keep the missus happy."

I'd spent a lot of time at Benny and Rachel's house. It was always filled with laughter and banter. They ribbed each other mercilessly, but it was always with love, the tenderness in their eyes toward each other never wavering.

"So, what brings you 'round these parts?" He spoke while steering me toward the little office with a huge glass window overlooking the cars being worked on. "Beer, mate?" Two beers were out of the little fridge next to the desk before I had a chance to answer.

"I'd love one." We both sat and cracked open the cans. "I'm just passing through on my way to Portland. Thought I'd stop in and see what trouble you've been up to."

He feigned a look of shock. "What, me? Trouble?" He shook his head. "Nah, no trouble here, not since Rachel had little BJ."

I nearly spat out my beer. "What? Oh, man, congratulations. I had no idea."

"Well, you wouldn't would ya, because you never fucking call." His words were harsh, and there was truth behind them, but his eyes were shining with mischief.

"So, who's the father?"

He erupted with a belly laugh. "Maybe it's you, cos BJ's the best-looking kid you've ever seen."

"So, no bald patch then?"

"Mate, he's nearly six months old and still as bald as a badger."

It was close to closing time, so Benny called in Pete, his apprentice, and sent him home. "You'll be coming for dinner, right?" Benny asked.

"Are you sure you don't need to check with Rachel?" She'd always been easygoing and had no problem with me dropping by unexpectedly, but kids can change things.

"Pfft, you know she loves you. She'd be gutted if you didn't come."

"Well, just try to stop me then."

I needed to find somewhere to stay the night so told Benny I'd get settled and come by for dinner.

"Bullshit, you're staying with us."

"I think that's pushing the friendship a bit. You've got a kid to think about now."

He wouldn't hear it. In fact, he insisted I go with him straight from the garage without giving Rachel any warning that I was coming. In turn, I insisted on grabbing a bottle of wine and some flowers to soften the blow of an unexpected dinner guest.

I needn't have worried. As soon as Rachel saw me walk through the door, she bustled over and gave me a warm hug. "You're staying for dinner and the night." It wasn't a question. "I'll make up the spare room for you."

I loved these people.

It was like I'd never been away. We talked and laughed into the night, the only time we were all quiet was when little BJ woke up, and Rachel brought him out into the living room. He had the chubbiest cheeks I'd ever seen, and his arms and legs were in rolls. He was adorable and not for the first time, I thought about what it might be like to find a special someone, settle down and start a family. What kind of dad would I be? Sitting back watching Benny and Rachel with BJ, one thing was clear, I saw what they had . . . and I wanted it.

"He looks like you, poor kid," I told Benny when Rachel took BJ back to his crib.

His eyes had followed them as they left the room and were still focused in that direction. "Yeah,

he does." He smiled. "Rachel's eyes though." He turned to face me, a cheeky grin on his face. "When are you gonna get a girl and knock her up?"

"I don't know." I chuckled. "I spend my time running from commitment and trying to not get them knocked up."

"Whatever happened with that girl you were seeing when you were here? What was her name? Chloe?"

I shrugged. For the brief time I'd made Jackson my home, I had met a girl. She was sweet and kind and one hell of a cook. We did all the couple things like movies, and dinner, even set up a picnic in my little living room one afternoon where we ate homemade pizza and drank red wine. For a while it had been fun, but there was always something missing. I wanted fireworks. I wanted to not be able to leave, and with Chloe, it had been too easy to say goodbye. "I left, and I guess she moved on."

"We thought she might have gone with you." He cocked a brow. "Did you ask her to go?"

Shaking my head, I remembered the morning I'd watched a news bulletin and realized another werewolf was on the hunt. On a balmy evening, a family with an infant had been taking an evening stroll around their neighborhood after eating dinner. Family members had said the mother was conscious of her baby weight and desperate to lose it, so every night they'd eat and then walk for half an hour while their meal went down. On this particular night, they'd walked to a park. They never made it back home.

"I never invited her. She never asked if she could." What kind of life would it have been for her? She wanted to be a chef and worked shifts in a restaurant kitchen a few nights a week. Jackson was her home, it had always been her home. She wanted to live there for the rest of her life, not live out of a suitcase, traveling from one crummy motel to the next. "My lifestyle wasn't for her." It wasn't for anyone. How could I go hunting on the full moon and not tell her what I was doing? There'd be secrets that when pushed for answers, would turn to lies. In the end, suspicion of my whereabouts would come between us.

"I hear she's with that real estate agent you rented your house through. So"—he took a swig of his beer—"I guess it turned out for the best?" It was a question. Had it turned out for the best?

I chuckled. "Geezus, you're a nosy bastard. Yes, it turned out for the best. I'm happy. I'm sure she's happy with what's-his-face. Everybody's happy."

Benny nodded but didn't look convinced. "So, where are you off to next?"

"I'm heading to Portland tomorrow. Yep. Back on the road."

"My cousin, Logan, has a garage in Portland. How long ya gonna be there?"

My life was one constant goodbye, some easier than others. It had been great to catch up with Benny and Rachel, and I had considered staying a few more days when they'd asked, but in my gut, I knew I needed to get to Portland and find this May girl. Still, giving them a hug goodbye had been tough. Not knowing when I'd be seeing them again was even tougher.

Benny had been his usual generous self and called his cousin Logan. After ten minutes on the phone, he'd convinced him that he needed an extra mechanic to look after the classic cars that weren't fitted with computers to monitor every aspect of the engine. The work would come in handy. I'd spent a month at Gran's motel, which was great as it hadn't cost me anything other than a few groceries here and there, but I also hadn't earned any money in that time.

My gut churned the entire drive to Portland. It had once been a place I couldn't wait to visit when summer vacations with my family had been the thing I looked forward to all year. But I hadn't been back since the night my parents were killed, avoiding the lake house and any mention of the city until now.

Debating where to go first, I decided to find a place to stay and get some food in my stomach. Benny had passed on Logan's number and address, but it was Sunday so I could call past his garage in the morning to check it out and see if he had any work lined up for me. I found a motel Northwest of Portland center about half an hour's drive from the lake house. It was close to the largest wooded area in Portland, and I had a hunch if the werewolf was going to hunt on the next full moon, it would be in the woods, so I wanted to be close by. It was six o'clock in the evening, and I'd driven nine hours straight. I was beat. Tossing my rucksack in the corner, I stretched out on the firm mattress, let out a loud sigh, and closed my eyes for a moment.

For eight years, since my eighteenth birthday, I'd been seeking revenge, hunting and killing every beast that crossed my path. My parents' memories had become my heartbeat, driving me with a thirst for blood that matched that of the creatures I hunted, but there was one thing I really needed—closure. The problem was, I didn't know if the werewolves that had killed my parents and destroyed my family had ever been caught or were still, to this day, wreaking havoc on innocent people. When I closed my eyes, I could see them as if it had happened only yesterday. Every wolf had distinctive marks, just like every other animal species, but they were only in their animal form for three nights each month. I could have crossed paths with them over and over again. One could have served me in the local grocery store while the other could have pumped my gas. I would never have known.

Sitting up, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and rested my head in my hands. After sitting in the car so long I needed to stretch and workout, so changing into my gym shorts and tank, I decided food could wait while I found a local gym.

My body ached, but it was the good kind of ache that let you know you'd worked hard. My fitness had always been a necessity, but lately I'd let it slip, letting other things take priority. It couldn't continue. Strength, agility, and an ability to fight had saved me on more than one occasion, and if I was to have any chance of beating this werewolf, the most cunning of creatures, I needed to be at the top of my game. Right next door to the gym was a Taekwondo studio, so in my desire to get back to peak physical condition, I'd joined both for a month's trial.

Hot water pelted from the shower head onto my shoulders, and I stood with my hands splayed against the tiled wall and felt the heat work my muscles. There were certain places I did my best thinking, in the car while chasing the white line, and in the shower. After fifteen minutes of being pummeled, I decided there was no time like the present and would try the first of five diners in the local area for dinner.

I dried off and once again kicked myself for not asking Maggie for a detailed description of May. If she was as cunning as I thought she'd be, she could easily change her name as often as she changed cities.

# CHAPTER TEN

# MAISIE

Pulling into the parking lot of Do Drop In Diner, a feeling of deja vu engulfed me. It had been years since I was last in Portland and I'd often thought about this diner and the owners, Sid and Rosemary, and their daughter Therese.

I sat in the car for a few minutes to gather my thoughts. Portland held a myriad of memories for me, some magical and daydream-worthy, others nightmare-inducing. I'd lost my parents in Portland many years ago when I'd been staying at my best friend, Lily's, lake house.

Finding out I was an orphan and being shuffled from foster home to foster home while the authorities searched for my grandmother, and I went to live with her pack was one of the most uncertain and confusing times of my life. Everything I was sure my life would amount to had changed in the blink of an eye, and I'd been thrown into a tornado of agony and a deep-seated feeling that my life was over before it had truly begun. Loneliness squeezed my heart, so much so that I'd built walls around it. Walls that had never come down as I learned to trust and rely on myself and no one else.

But Portland was also the place where I'd met him, Connor Walsh. My best friend's cousin who in the space of one month had wormed his way into my heart and never left. But how could he when he'd been walled in? I guess that was the reason why he was the only person who kept my heart from completely shattering to dust. He was the one person who reminded me that there was some good in this world, a reason to hold onto my humanity. He was my first crush, my first kiss, and although it was only a peck that I'd initiated on a whim, it had sealed his presence in my daydreams forevermore.

He was only twelve at the time, a tall, lanky boy with a devilish smirk. He was athletic and funny, and we'd shared many secret glimpses between us that Lily and her idiot brother, Dylan, never knew about. I'd told Lily of my crush on Connor, and we'd talked and giggled late into the night, planning how we would somehow arrange for us to marry so I could become part of Lily's family. It was something I so desperately wanted, not only to have Lily as a cousin and best friend which was something I'd never had, but a feeling of belonging.

My parents and I had moved from town to town, and it was hard always being the new girl in school, always feeling different, but Lily had welcomed me on my first day—probably at the instruction of the school's principal—and instantly made me feel I had a place I was accepted. That was why I begged my parents to let me go to the lake house that summer. I never imagined I'd be saying goodbye to them for the last time as they dropped me at Lily's. If I'd known, I would have hugged them a little tighter for a little longer, and when Mom called out 'I love you' I would have answered her instead of being in too much of a hurry and dismissing it with a wave over my shoulder.

I also never imagined I'd meet Connor, the boy who had stolen my heart.

Sliding from the driver's seat of my old Pontiac, I promised myself that this time while in Portland, I would visit the location of my parents' shooting, and if I could remember how to get there, I would visit Lily's lake house.

The familiar tinkling of the bell above the door announced my arrival as I strode into Do Drop In. I had no idea if Sid and Rosemary still owned the diner, but even if they didn't, I might still be able to score a few shifts if luck was on my side. The diner was quiet, being in between lunch and dinner, so I made my way to the counter and took a seat.

"What can I get you, love," came a familiar voice. "We have cherry pie, fresh baked . . . Oh, for heaven's sake, May! Is that you?"

A huge smile swept across my face as Rosemary, who had been fiddling with something under the counter as she spoke, finally looked up.

"Yes, it's me. Long time, no see. How are you, Rosemary?"

Instead of answering, she turned over her shoulder and called, "Sid! Sid, get out here. You'll never guess who's back."

There was a clanging of saucepans followed by muttering before Sid's flustered face poked through the serving window. He took a few moments to register before a wide grin spread across his face. Wiping his hands on a dishcloth, he tossed it on the counter before pushing through the swinging doors and entering the main dining area.

"You know, we were talking about you not two days ago." He continued his advance toward me as he spoke. "Vera got into it the other night and Rosie and I were saying how calm and happy everyone was when you were working here." Finally, he reached me and pulled me into a tight bear hug before stepping back.

"Bloody Vera, don't get me started. She drives the customers away," Rosemary grumbled. "I don't know why we keep her on."

"Isn't she your cousin?" I asked Sid.

Rosemary rolled her eyes and scowled.

Vera had been at the diner the last time I worked there. She was a middle-aged woman with leathery skin and a particularly unpleasant demeanor. On more than one occasion I'd had to step in and sweet talk a customer at Rosemary's request after Vera had offered less than courteous service.

"Yeah, she's family," Sid said, nudging Rosemary with his shoulder. "We do what we can for family, don't we?"

"Hmph. I know what I'd like to do to her," Rosemary muttered before taking a deep, calming breath and turning to me. "So, my lovely, how have you been? Where have you been? It's been too long, May." Rosemary rubbed my arm. She was nowhere near as affectionate as Sid, so this gesture meant a lot.

Sliding onto a stool while Rosemary poured coffee, I thought about all the places I'd visited since last stepping foot in Portland.

"You know me," I said with a grin. "I've been seeing this beautiful country of ours. From the desert of Nevada to Niagara Falls. My poor, old Pontiac has gone the distance."

"I can't believe she's still going," Sid said, pouring himself a coffee.

I laughed. "She's still going, but I don't think she's too happy about it." I bit my lip. I'd planned on easing into asking for my old job back, but, what the hell . . . "She actually needs her brakes done, they've been making an awful grinding noise, but money's tight. I plan to see Logan once I have the funds to cover it."

"So, when can you start?" Rosemary asked. "Do you need a day or two to find a place to stay and

settle in before your first shift?"

I hadn't realized the tension I was holding in my entire body until I breathed out and every muscle relaxed.

"Are you sure?" This seemed too easy.

Rosemary gave me a smile that reached her eyes. "Therese is doing extra shifts, but I think her studies are suffering a bit. She'll be happy to cut back on her hours, and to see you of course."

I couldn't smile widely enough. "Thanks, guys. That would be great."

I hadn't really needed a couple of days to find a place to stay. There was an old backpackers' hostel that I'd stayed in a few times over the years that thankfully had a vacant private room with a bathroom attached. It was a luxury compared to some of the other rooms in the hostel that slept six on bunk beds with a shared bathroom up the hall. To most people, it was probably cheap and nasty, but having a room to myself where I could lay out my belongings without fear of someone stealing my stuff felt as good as a five-star hotel.

Once I'd settled in and checked that my door was locked, I jumped in my car and pulled up Google Maps on my phone. The location of my parents' shooting was imprinted in my brain even though I'd only been there once as a child. As I punched in the location and pulled away from the curb, memories of the worst day of my life came flooding back.

*It was another hot day, and Lily and I had been taking turns swinging on the rope over the river when her mom came to speak to us. Her face was ashen and her eyes wide and unbelieving, and I knew something terrible had happened. My first thought was that something had happened to Connor and his family because why else would she be so upset? But as her focus homed in on me and she pulled me toward her into a hug, confusion filled my brain.*

*"I've just had a call from the Sheriff's Department," she said softly. "It's your parents. Something horrible has happened, Maisie." Rubbing my back, she continued, "There was a hunting accident. I'm so sorry . . ." A sob filled the air, and her body trembled. "They're gone, honey. They're both gone."*

*My head shook. She'd got it wrong. My parents were fine. They were camping and hunting on the full moon. If anything, someone else's parents were gone, but not mine.*

*"It'll be all right, it'll be all right. You'll get through this, honey. We're here for you," she whispered over and over, consoling me.*

*Lily burst into tears and hugged me so tight, sandwiching me between her and her mom. I knew I should cry; I knew I should react in some way, but nothing would come out, I was numb. I couldn't process what I was being told, so my numbness turned into denial.*

*"I think they got it wrong," I said, trying to pull myself free from the arms that were suffocating me. "It's not my parents, they must have the wrong people." I stepped away, sure that at any minute the call would come through apologizing for the mix-up.*

*"Honey, they've been positively identified. All their belongings were found. That's how they knew to call me to let you know."*

*"How do you know? I don't believe it." I was adamant they'd got it wrong, and no amount of*

*Chinese whispers would convince me otherwise. If I was to believe it, I had to see for myself.*

*We argued back and forth until finally, Lily's mom called the Sheriff's Department and asked if we could break protocol and go to the location. After waiting another hour for the crime scene unit to finish up, Deputy Roland called and told us where to meet him.*

*Sitting in the backseat of their car, staring at everything but taking nothing in, the same thought played on a loop in my mind.*

*It was a mistake, it had to be. They weren't my parents that had been found. No, my parents were the predators, the hunters, they weren't hunted and shot. They were cunning and strong. It had been a full moon, and that was when they were invincible. They were hunters. It had to be a mistake.*

*It didn't take long before the deputy flagged us to pull over behind his car, parked on the side of the road. As soon as I stepped out of the vehicle, I could smell it. Blood and something else I'd never smelt before—death. Without waiting for the others, I took off in a sprint straight into the heart of the woods. I didn't need to be told the direction. Even at my young age, I had heightened senses, and my sense of smell could have led me straight to the exact location in the dead of night with my eyes closed.*

*Within ten minutes of running, I reached a clearing marked with bright yellow tape. My parents' tent was still erected, and I could smell them in the air. Their musky scent tainted every tree and shrub enclosing me in a warm, familiar hug. For a moment I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply.*

*It was them. Even if I hadn't recognized their tent and belongings. Their scent was everywhere. I fell to my knees as a never-ending torrent of tears flooded my face and fell to my lap, soaking my bare legs. It was a few minutes before Lily and her family arrived behind me, and I felt Lily crouch beside me and wrap her arms around me.*

*We rocked from side to side for what felt like an eternity, and I sunk into a wallowing pit of despair. More footsteps grew louder behind us, and an unfamiliar voice pulled my attention.*

*When I finally found the strength to look up, I saw a portly man with a caring face. "Maisie, is it?" I nodded. "I'm Sheriff Hudson. I'm sorry for your loss. I can't imagine how you must be feeling right now."*

*Wiping my wet face with my palms, I stood and brushed the leaves and twigs from my knees. I needed to be strong. I had to show everyone, including myself, that I was capable of surviving this tragedy.*

*So, I did the only thing I could think of, I pulled my shoulders back and raised my head. "Are you in charge of the investigation?"*

*"Yes, I am, and believe me when I say, we'll do everything in our power to find who did this to your parents."*

*I believed him, but I also knew they'd never find the truth behind the killings. I'd heard about hunters who went after our kind, but I never believed it until this moment. It was a whole other world that people like the sheriff knew nothing about. How could they? They were human, I could smell it from where I stood, and werewolves were the stuff of fantasy and horror movies.*

*"I have one question," the sheriff continued, and I tried to focus on what he was saying. "The coroner's preliminary report suggests that your parents had some teeth pulled recently." He looked uncomfortable as he spoke, shuffling his feet and sweating profusely. "Do you know if this happened before their camping trip, or . . . ah . . . after?"*

*After? I shook my head trying to process what he was asking. "My parents haven't been to the*

*dentist recently if that's what you're asking."*

*He nodded, and a hefty sigh shook his body. "That's what we thought."*

Pulling up on the side of the road, I grabbed a water bottle before locking my car. The sun was on its descent, and a color palette of purples, crimson, and burnt orange painted the sky. Heading in the direction of the location where my parents had taken their last breaths, I took the time to take in my surroundings. I could see why they'd chosen this part of the woods. It was isolated from cabins and dense enough to not draw many campers, but close enough to the road for them to apply their tricks.

My parents didn't share my views on hunting. They saw themselves as apex predators and had no problem feasting on humans when they turned. Adding to their razor-sharp teeth, claws, and ability to over-power any animal they came into contact with, they also had the ability to use their human, analytical brains and devise traps.

I hadn't yet had my first transition when they had been taken from me, but I'd heard enough stories from them and their shifter friends to understand that this was a choice they made and one I was vehemently against. Maybe it was because I was attending regular schools and making friends with human kids, or maybe it was my conscience telling me that killing for what boiled down to 'fun' was inherently wrong. Whatever the reason, I'd decided long before I'd ever howled at the moon to only kill for food and to choose my victims wisely.

It had been fourteen years since I'd tracked through these woods, but as soon as I reached the clearing, I knew it was the place. An eerie silence hung in the air, and I found a sturdy tree, sunk to the ground, and rested my back against it. I'd thought many times about that fateful day, but one thought always resurfaced above all others.

*What had happened to their teeth?*

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

# CONNOR

Feeling stuffed and relaxed, I leaned back into the faded red vinyl bench seat and pushed the plate that held only a few burger scraps away from the edge of the table. It was quiet at Do Drop In Diner, and although I'd struck out on finding May as there was only one guy behind the counter and his daughter working the Sunday evening shift, I knew it was a place I'd be eating at often. The food was good, portions not overly big, and priced really cheaply. Sid, the owner, was pleasant, and we chatted as best we could, shouting between the booth where I sat and the kitchen where he prepared meals on the hotplate grill and washed a mound of dishes.

He asked the usual difficult-to-answer questions. Where was I from? What brought me to Portland? How long was I staying? I'd opened my mouth to reply with the rehearsed answers I always gave, but something stopped me. I don't know if it was because the answers seemed so far removed from who I now was or because Sid seemed like a genuinely nice guy, and I was tired of lying to people.

Where was I from? I used to be from Washington, but that was so long ago when I was just a kid. I wasn't from anywhere anymore. How could you call somewhere home when the longest you stayed in any given place was a few weeks?

What brought me to Portland? The truth would sound so ridiculous. *A werewolf. I'm hunting a werewolf.*

How long was I staying? I had no idea. It would be until the job was done or the werewolf moved on.

Sighing, I gave the vaguest answers possible and hoped they would suffice.

"Did you want more coffee, sir?" Therese, the young waitress asked, pot poised above my cup. She looked to be all of about fifteen or sixteen and had the same fair complexion and orange-red hair as her father.

"No thanks. Any more and I won't sleep a wink." Not that I slept much anyway. The same nightmare had ramped up like it was on crack the last week or so and I'd dreaded closing my eyes, knowing that I'd be waking in a sweat with my mom's screams ringing in my ears.

I settled my check and made sure to leave a good tip. I knew I'd be back there, and it didn't hurt to be in favor with them, then headed back to the motel for what I knew would be a restless night.

One diner down, four more to go.

Benny and his cousin Logan were cut from the same cloth. As soon as I introduced myself his businesslike demeanor dropped, and that familiar glint sparkled in his eye.

"So, you're the mechanical genius Benny told me about?" he said tongue in cheek.

I chuckled. "I don't know about genius, but I can fix my car." I indicated to the Chevy parked out front and his eyes lit up.

"She's a classic. How long have you had her?" He wiped his hands on an oily rag and walked toward the car to take a closer look.

"She was my dad's so I can't remember a time when the car wasn't in the family." I watched from a few paces back while he ran his hand lovingly over the hood.

He nodded, then proceeded to walk around the car, taking it all in. "Benny was right about the car." He paused just long enough to catch my gaze. "Was he right about the women too?"

"Well, that depends on what he told you." If I knew Benny, he would have told him to lock up his daughters if he had any. He always exaggerated my conquests and made it sound much more exciting than it actually was.

Logan laughed, his shoulders bouncing in time with the sound. "He said you're a bit of a lady's man and I should watch out for Diana, my wife. Reckons she'll be falling all over you in a matter of minutes."

I held up my hands in surrender. "I've no interest in anyone's wife."

"Are you sure? 'Cos, if you can put up with her nonstop nagging, she's all yours."

I warmed to Logan instantly.

Unfortunately, there weren't a lot of classic cars in town, so while Logan was happy to help me out and throw some mechanical work my way, it wouldn't be consistent. Instead, he told me to call past, and if they were busy, I could provide cheap labor and a bit of muscle. He smirked at the term muscle, as my bicep was the size of his leg. Some work was better than nothing, and would give me time to find May and study her.

It would also give me time to visit the lake house. The mere thought of which had bile rising in my throat, but I knew it was time and part of the healing process. So, without time to dwell on it and find a million and one reasons not to go, I climbed into the car and pointed her toward the lake.

Fourteen years had passed since I'd last visited the summer vacation home, but I could have driven there with my eyes closed. The last time the Chevy had made its way along the winding dirt road that led to the house, dust had circled, shielding my view from the rear window. This time mud splattered under the tires as I slowly took a step toward closure.

As I pulled up under the carport adjoining the house, I took a deep breath. The house and grounds had seemed so much bigger when I was a kid, or maybe my memory was playing tricks on me. She seemed old and run down, and I guessed that my uncle and aunt hadn't been there for a while either. The murders had affected my entire family although I was too young to realize at the time. When you're a kid, everything is about you. How you feel, how events affect you personally, but my aunt had lost her sister, and looking back, there was a vibrancy that had been extinguished that night for all of us.

I'd never visited the house during fall, and I had to admit, the carpet of leaves in shades of brown and orange across the ground painted a beautiful abstract work of art. From the front verandah, the sound of rapidly flowing water drew me toward it. In summer, the water was calm, almost still, a perfect location for swimming and jumping from the rope, but with the recent rainfall, the water flowed quicker as connecting rivers pushed it through.

The old rope still hung from the branch that stretched out over the water and for a moment, the

memory of swinging across the water and performing a perfect backflip while Maisie Blake watched, cast a smile across my lips. It had been the perfect summer, and I wondered again what had happened to Maisie, and why she'd never visited Lily after they'd taken me in.

The house was locked up tight, but I knew that beneath a rock in the front garden bed there'd be a key.

This was it.

Stepping purposefully across the threshold, I allowed myself a moment to remember. I remembered nights around the large dining table when burgers and sausages would be served on colorful platters after my dad and uncle had cooked them on the grill. Where large bowls of salads were passed around, and I'd reluctantly take the smallest amount of greens possible to ensure I'd be allowed ice cream at the end of the meal. And I remembered my mom's laughter. Tears stung my eyes, but I blinked them away. She was always laughing and smiling. There was never a problem so big that she couldn't fix it with the warmth that radiated from her. My dad, always by her side, would drape a protective arm around her shoulder and watch lovingly as she spoke. He'd laugh when she laughed because it was so contagious, and soon enough, everyone would join in. She was the life of the party, the heart and soul of the family, and my dad was the backbone. My uncle and aunt had done their best to raise me after that summer, but a part of me had died with my parents that night, and I'd spent the last fourteen years trying to fill the void with vengeance for their deaths.

Following the flow of the house, I made my way along the worn floorboards to the bedrooms. The room I'd shared with Dylan accommodated bunk beds constructed in dark walnut, their mattresses covered with drop sheets. The room next door was much lighter, with pale pine bunks and pink walls. Lily and Maisie had shared the room, and I smiled as my hand ran over the soft wood remembering how night after night I'd strained to eavesdrop on their conversations through the adjoining wall.

The room my parents always used was further down the hall and had a bathroom attached. It was large with polished timber floors covered by a thick plush natural fiber rug, and a huge floor-to-ceiling window looked out toward the lake. My parents had left clothes for us at the house so we wouldn't have to pack too much each year. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I pulled open the closet doors—it was empty, devoid of any memory that they'd ever been there. The heavy-hearted sigh that escaped at the sight of empty hangers was laced with relief. No matter how many years had passed, I wasn't ready to see a closet full of my parents' belongings.

Wandering through the remainder of the house, every room filling my mind and heart with memories, I wondered how long it had been since anyone had been there. Drop sheets protected the furniture from a layer of dust that had settled. Food that could last for long periods of time had always been stored in the pantry in airtight containers, but all those containers were empty. The house had been forgotten and neglected, but the memories lived on.

Taking a steadying breath, I made my way to the thick, wooden mantle above the bluestone fireplace, my eyes locked on the framed photos from years gone by. One by one, I traced the years from when Dylan, Lily, and I were toddlers to that final summer with Maisie. My parents had hardly aged over that time and my mom's smile hadn't changed.

Reaching into my back pocket, I pulled out my wallet and flicked it open. Tucked safely inside were two photos of the people I loved the most. One was my parents, the dogeared corners displaying how much I'd held the image over the years. The other was a picture of the four of us kids standing in a row, arms linked, and smiling like we didn't have a care in the world. A heavy crease was well worn through the middle of the image. On one half were Dylan and Lily, on the other, Maisie with me on the end. It was the only photo I had of her.

The woods at the side of the house were thick with fallen leaves covering the shrubs that grew beneath the taller trees. It really was picture-perfect, and a perfect place to hunt with an abundance of wildlife ranging from deer to rabbits and everything in between.

Then it hit me. This was the perfect location, not only for me to stay but for the werewolf to hunt when the next full moon rose. Yes, every room was filled with memories, but if I was to find the closure I so desperately needed to put this chapter of my life behind me and find peace, I needed to face those demons head-on.

With three more diners down and no luck finding May, I found myself back at Do Drop In Diner early one Wednesday morning after an hour of pumping weights and working up a sweat at the gym. It was the third time I'd been there in as many days, and I was beginning to feel like a regular. The place was quiet with only three other people enjoying their breakfast and coffee at separate tables.

"Hey, Sid, how are you?" I asked, sliding onto a stool at the counter. "Are you here on your own?"

"Morning, Connor. Just waiting on my wife. She'll be in as soon as she drops Therese at school." He stayed on the other side of the window by the grill, flipping bacon and eggs on the hotplate. "What can I get you?"

"That looks good." I indicated to the grill with a nod. "Give me the works and a strong coffee, thanks."

"The pot's there if you want to help yourself." He pointed the spatula in the direction of the coffee station. "Unless you want to wait a few minutes for me to finish here."

It was all the invitation I needed. Sliding from the stool, I made myself at home on the other side of the counter, finding the largest coffee mug I could and pouring myself a cup from the pot labeled 'strong'. It was strong enough to peel paint, and I guzzled it down and went back for a refill. The last few nights had been plagued with nightmares, and I'd woken while the room was still dark, bathed in sweat. I put it down to staying at the lake house and my subconscious reminding me that I was sleeping next to the woods where the werewolves had most likely been hunting, all those years ago.

I was still behind the counter when Sid's wife, Rosemary, came bustling in, the flush in her cheeks spread down her neck and onto her chest. She was a round woman with the same ginger hair as Sid. No wonder Therese was fair-skinned, freckled, and with the brightest of orange hair. She tossed her purse under the counter, then with hands firmly planted on hips, took a quick visual inventory of the condiments and coffee pots to check if anything needed refilling.

"Connor, are you after a job?" she joked in her usual rambunctious manner, watching me fill the mug for the third time from behind the counter. "Go on, off with you, that's my job. Your job is to sit there, eat the food, and leave a hefty tip." She shooed me away with a chuckle. "You'll be wanting to get paid next."

"Looks like you need some help, but I don't think I'm cut out for dealing with difficult customers every day." I scooted back to the customer side of the counter and took up my seat on the stool again.

"We have some help, but she's not due in until dinner time . . . tomorrow?" She glanced over her shoulder at Sid for confirmation. He nodded. "It's her day off today. Lovely girl, she's only new this time around, but she worked here a few years ago. Very experienced, and she gets on so well with all the customers and with Therese." She busied herself filling the sugar and milk and wiping down the

counter. “It was such a shame when she left last time.”

“Oh, really? How long has she been working here?” I asked, my question laced with a nervous buzz in the pit of my stomach.

“Hmm, I’m not sure.” She turned over her shoulder. “Sid, how long has May been working here?”

# CHAPTER TWELVE

# CONNOR

I couldn't get May out of my head as I polished wax into the trunk of a red 2014 Toyota Corolla that belonged to a Mrs. Watkins. Logan had called just after ten to ask if I wanted to help by washing the cars they'd finished servicing before the customers picked them up. It wasn't exactly what I had in mind, but beggars can't be choosers, and I jumped at the chance to earn a little cash. Money had been tight, especially as I'd eaten out at nearly every meal in my quest to find the elusive May. But finally I'd found her, or at least where she was due to be. Once I'd made contact, I could buy groceries and cook for myself at the lake house which would be much cheaper.

By closing time I'd washed, waxed, and detailed seven cars. Logan stood back, arms crossed over this chest, and watched as I worked leather polish into the seat of a C-Class Mercedes, the last car of the day.

"You love your cars, don't you?" he commented as I worked the cloth into every crease.

"I treat every car like it's my own, so I guess the answer to that would be yes." I knew not everyone treated their car like it was their baby, but that didn't mean I couldn't do my best work. Besides, polishing and buffing was the kind of work you really didn't have to think about, so I had time to let my mind wander.

To plan.

To picture in my mind's eye how I would catch this werewolf on the next full moon.

"Okay, well, I'd love to stay and chat, I mean, I really would, but Diana will have my balls if I'm not home in"—he checked his watch—"half an hour. Her sister's coming for dinner. Some big bust-up with the boyfriend that I'm gonna have to listen to and pretend to give a shit about."

I laughed while he squirmed at the thought. "Enjoy your night in with the girls."

"Hey, you wouldn't like to come, would you?" He stepped forward, eyes wide with hope. "You could be rebound guy, Diana's sister's not entirely unattractive, and it would take some of the pressure off me when they start asking for answers to the mysteries of the male mind."

I shook my head and smiled. "What mysteries? We think about sport, beer, and sex. And not necessarily in that order."

"I know, right?" He threw his hands in the air. "They fucking grill me on 'why did he do this?' or 'why did he say that?' It's not rocket science."

Shaking my head again, I climbed out of the front seat to survey my handy work. "Sorry, Logan. I've got plans tonight." Slapping him on the back for moral support, I proceeded to bundle up the cleaning supplies to put them away, leaving him behind with the most miserable expression on his face.

I was starving. After a gym session at the crack of dawn where I pumped weights and sprinted on the treadmill until my lungs burned, then going straight to the garage and working through lunch, I could have eaten a horse . . . and the saddle.

My usual prime beef burger wouldn't be enough, I needed carbs and protein, but my stomach was tied in knots waiting to set eyes on May. The diner was busy, and I slid into the only available booth and cast an eye around the bustling room. There were two waitresses plus Therese that I could see, as well as Sid out back cooking up a storm, and Rosemary behind the counter keeping everybody in check. The menu was vast for a diner, and I read through it, flipping the laminated pages back and forth, my mouth watering at every single item on the menu. A shadow fell over the table, and my stomach clenched, but I held focus on the menu and played it cool. I knew the waitress was busy and didn't have time for me to make up my mind, but I needed a few seconds to steady the drum that pounded in my chest.

"Hi, can I take your order?" a sweet voice asked.

"Ah . . ." I flipped the pages again and puffed out my cheeks trying to make a quick decision. "Spaghetti and meatballs, with extra meatballs . . . and a side of mixed vegetables." I finally decided and glanced up to see who that sweet voice belonged to, certain it wouldn't be May as no werewolf could sound so innocent.

Her eyes were downcast, taking my order. "Anything to drink?" With pen poised, she waited.

"Water's fine." I'd been looking at her face, or what I could see of it, and now finally she looked up from the order pad and smiled.

"Okay, won't be long." Her nose crinkled as she brushed a stray strawberry-blonde hair from her freckled cheek with the back of her hand. Her eyes scanned my face until they met mine. I gasped, then instantly tried to cover it up with a pathetic fake cough.

Her eyes . . . one pale blue, the other a mix of blue and dark chocolate brown, were staring back at me with something that resembled recognition.

"Do I know you?" she asked with a tremble in her voice. Taking a step back away from the table, she clutched the pad to her chest. "Are you from . . . from Clear Water Falls?"

My head shook before I found my voice. "I don't know where Clear Water Falls is, sorry." I glanced at her chest in search of a name badge, but there wasn't one. "Are you . . . is your name, Maisie? Maisie Blake?"

Now it was her turn to gasp, only there was no covering it up as the order pad dropped to the floor and she fumbled to regain her composure. I slipped across the bench seat and bent to the ground to help her.

"It's okay, I've got it," she snapped, grabbing the pad from the linoleum.

"Maisie?" I asked again, knowing I'd feel like a total idiot if it wasn't her. But fully aware that her eyes were unique, the contrast between them as different as night and day. Huge eyes met mine, filled with fear. "It's Connor, Connor Walsh. I'm Lily and Dylan's cousin. We met . . ."

"At the lake house," she finished in a whisper, all the fear draining from her face as relief took over. "Of course, I thought I recognized you. It's been so long." Her cheeks which were moments ago drained of color, now flared red. "I remember you."

I smiled, the awkward twelve-year-old boy surfacing after being absent for fourteen years. "I remember you too."

An impatient customer clicked his fingers in the air and waved her over.

She gave me a half grin. "Sorry, duty calls."

There would be no time to talk about the best and worst summer of my life while the diner was so busy. But there was plenty of time for me to watch as she glided between tables carrying plates or picked up empty glasses and smiled sweetly without missing a beat. The way she moved was poetry in motion. I'd never seen anyone walk like they were on skates, and she had a smile and kind word for everyone. I could see customers coming back just to be served by Maisie.

There was only one other waitress who was servicing a different section of the diner and it had to be May. I needed to see her more closely, positive I'd be able to sense the wolf inside her. As casually as possible I turned my torso so that I was leaning against the wall, my right leg stretched along the bench seat of the booth. It was ridiculous to feel so self-conscious, no one was watching me, but my movements were anything but natural as I glanced over my shoulder toward the only other woman dressed in a blue uniform and white apron.

"Hi, Connor," Therese called as she scurried past, balancing three plates overloaded with food, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. This was crazy. After so many years of hunting, I should be a pro, but my gut was churning, my palms clammy. It was like the first time I'd hunted. I needed to get my shit together.

The bathroom was over the other side of the diner, so I decided to go for a walk, making a point to pass as close to the other waitress as possible. She was older. Skinny with leathery skin that had seen too much sun. As I passed, a customer asked for ketchup, and she nearly bit his head off, grumbling that she was busy and he could get off his lazy ass and get it himself from the condiments station.

That had to be May. She was lean and mean and obviously spent time outdoors with skin that could be crafted into boots. As I pushed open the door to the bathroom, I glanced over my shoulder to find Maisie watching me. She blushed, diverted her eyes quickly, and brushed a persistent lock of hair from her cheek. My heart sang. After all this time she had the ability to send butterflies circling in my stomach. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt them, but it was probably the last time I'd seen her. For all the women I'd been with over the years, none of them had the effect that a simple glance from Maisie could invoke.

While in the bathroom, I checked myself in the mirror. I shouldn't have. I'd spent the day surrounded by grease and filth and gone straight to the diner from work. The t-shirt beneath the red hoodie was grubby and probably stank. My hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, needed a cut and wash.

I shrugged at my reflection. "You're not looking your best, buddy." But there was nothing I could do. I just had to ensure the next time I saw Maisie I was more presentable with a decent haircut.

Dinner was delicious as always from Do Drop In, but I ate slowly, trying to drag it out. I wanted so badly to speak to Maisie. To catch up and find out what had happened to her after that summer, but my priority had to be following the woman I was sure was my target to see where she went once she left the diner. She had been cunning and zig-zagged across the country, so I needed to learn as much as possible about her.

Finally, the dinner crowd thinned leaving only myself and two other stragglers.

"Can I get you anything else, Connor?" Maisie looked worn out from being run off her feet all night. Her crisp white apron was stained from a coffee spill, but she still managed a smile. "The cherry pie's really good. Can I fetch you some?"

My gaze skimmed over her face, taking in every feature, every freckle painted across her cheeks

and nose. Cherry pie sounded perfect but not the kind she was referring to. Still, I needed to stay until closing time, and there was always room for pie. “I’d love some cherry pie,” I replied with what I hoped was a smoldering intensity in my eyes and not the look of a crazy person.

She turned scarlet as our eyes locked. “With cream?” She bit her bottom lip expectantly.

“Is there any other way?”

A flush crept down her neck to her chest, and she hesitated before scurrying off to the counter. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. The curve of her hips as they swayed, her long slender arms. She was so graceful, and I searched my memory of her. Was she always like this? What twelve-year-old boy would even notice these things? But I’d always known there was something special about her, even if I couldn’t put my finger on it.

She brought the pie over and turned to leave. “Can you sit for a while?” I quickly looked around. “You’re not busy anymore.”

With hesitation, she glanced at Rosemary who nodded and tried to hide a smirk. “Okay then. I guess I can sit for a minute, but I do have to help set up for the morning.” She slid in across from me and swept her hands across her rosy cheeks and into her hair, smoothing it back into the strawberry-blonde ponytail. We hadn’t spent a lot of time talking all those years ago, but I felt like I knew her so well. I guess it was because every time I thought of my parents, my mind searched for a happy time to counteract the torment, and the happy place, funnily enough, was that same summer and Maisie. So to me, I’d seen her nearly every day.

Small talk was always difficult for me, never having learned the art of it. The only time I’d really spoken to girls was when I had one goal in mind, and talk had been kept to a minimum. But that wasn’t what I was looking for here. I was genuinely interested in where she had been, and what had happened to her over the years.

“So, how have you been?” *Good start, dickhead*.

Her smile lit up her face. “I’ve been good.” So many emotions flashed through her mismatched eyes and were gone again in an instant. “How have you been?”

*God, where did I start?* “Not too bad.” *My life’s a mess. I’m technically homeless and spend my time tracking and killing werewolves.* “Yep, pretty good.” She looked over at Rosemary and made a move to leave. “I’m really curious”—I took her hand to stop her from leaving, making her jump —“why didn’t you ever visit Lily after that summer?”

Her brow furrowed, darkness masking her glowing skin. “How do you know I never visited?”

“Because I went to live there, and you never came by.” That was all I needed to offer for now. The gruesome details could be saved for another time. This wasn’t the time or place to talk about death and the loss of one’s childhood.

Her eyes were cast down to our joined hands. “My parents were killed that summer. I . . . I moved away.”

Bile burned in my throat until I swallowed it down. “What happened? How did they die?” It was insensitive to blurt it out, but I needed to know. Had they been killed in the same way as my parents? She’d mentioned they were camping near the lake house, in the woods not far from where my parents were slaughtered. Could we have suffered the same fate and not known?

“Shot.” Her eyes met mine. There was so much sorrow. “They were camping, and”—she shrugged—“the authorities thought it was a deer hunter, probably drunk, and he shot at movement in the woods without realizing it was my parents.” Her eyes flickered to the right, remembering. “They didn’t find the bodies for a few days. The murderer didn’t even report it. He just left them there.” Tears spilled over her lashes, streaking her freckled cheeks. “They were only twenty feet from their

tent."

"I'm so sorry." What else could I say? I was relieved they hadn't met the same fate as my parents, but regardless of how they'd died, she'd been left an orphan just like me.

Her hand wriggled from mine and swiped her cheeks dry. "Maybe if I'd gone with them like I was supposed to . . ."

"Then you could have been killed too. Thank God you weren't there."

"But I was supposed to be. Every year we camped together over summer only that year . . ." She sighed heavily. "That year I'd begged my parents to let me go with Lily. We used to move around a lot because of my dad's work. Lily was the first real friend I'd made in such a long time, and I was desperate to stay at the house with her instead of a little tent."

"Life has a way of putting us where we're meant to be."

"Yeah, well, right now I'm meant to be helping clean up." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes this time as she shuffled out from behind the table. "It was good to see you. Sorry for blubbering all over you." She chuckled, and the glint was back in her eyes. "I'll see you again, Connor?"

"You definitely will, Maisie." I had no intention of waiting another fourteen years before seeing her again.

"Great." She turned toward the counter but hesitated before turning back toward me. "No one's called me Maisie in years. Everyone just calls me May."

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

My hips had a little extra sway to them as I left Connor's booth and made my way to the storeroom. There wasn't anything I needed to fetch from the room, but I needed a minute alone to compose myself. The hand Connor had held still tingled as I closed the storeroom door behind me. Pressing my back to the cool wood, I closed my eyes, my ponytail resting against the door. The drumming of my heart pounded against my ribcage. This was too much. After all these years, here he was, larger than life . . . and he remembered me.

With an excited squeal bubbling up from my belly, I let the sound ring out in the deserted room as I stepped away from the door and spun around with my arms held wide. Thank goodness I was alone because I must have looked like an idiot with a grin so wide my face hurt.

Flopping down onto the stool that was used to stand on to reach the top shelves, I pressed my hand to my chest and willed my heartbeat to slow. My God he was good-looking. He'd been cute the last time I'd seen him, looking older than his twelve years, but boy oh boy, had he had a major glow-up. The man was built, with broad shoulders and arms that pulled tight against the T-shirt beneath the hoodie, showing off impressive biceps with the slightest movement. His chest filled out his shirt perfectly then cut in toward his waist. What I would give to see what else he had to offer.

His blond hair was a little long, but he could wear it any way and pull it off. But it was his eyes that had me mesmerized, the golden flecks taking me back to the lake house and reminding me how he had stolen my heart.

And his scent. I let out a guttural groan. His unique, masculine scent smelled like . . . home. There was no other way to describe it. It was his and yet it was so familiar as if I'd been seeking it all my life. As soon as I'd gotten within a few feet of him my body had reacted. Every sense was on high alert it was both invigorating, sending my blood racing, but also the most soothing, welcoming feeling I'd ever known.

The hand he'd been holding—the hand I may never wash again—went to my lips. It was the closest I'd come to reliving our kiss since it had happened.

*I wonder if he remembers that little peck?*

I'd thought myself so bold and brave to step up to his dad's car and kiss him through the open window. I had no idea how he'd respond. He could have pushed me away, screwed up his face, and swiped any trace of me from his lips. But instead, he'd leaned in, allowing me to take what I'd wanted, cementing that memory for a lifetime—it was my first kiss, and it was perfect. When I'd stepped back, the butterflies in my stomach were a tornado of nerves. If he shunned me, I'd be devastated for life, but he didn't, his eyes had grown wide before he'd smiled and ever so subtly licked his lips.

My heart had burst.

And now here he was, sitting in my diner, looking mighty fine, and wanting to see me again. When he'd first spoken to me, I'd heard his elevated heartbeat before I'd looked at his face. I could tell he was anxious and that made me anxious. After all this time of moving from place to place, had my past caught up with me?

I knew eventually I would have to stop running, but I wasn't ready yet. There was still so much I wanted to see and do, to assert my independence and live the life I wanted before being dragged back to my grandma and the archaic pack she belonged to.

In a sense, seeing Connor again was my past catching up with me, but the best part of my past. I would happily stand still forever if this small but happy piece of my childhood could stand there with me.

I smiled. He'd been nervous when he'd recognized me and my skin had felt flushed as his eyes had danced over my face, landing on my mismatched eyes as realization dawned on him. I had often thought of Connor Walsh. Spending most of my time alone, I'd only ventured into bars when the nights had seemed too long to be alone. Many times I'd sat at the end of a bar, nursing a drink and daydreaming that the man who had been my first kiss, would magically find me again. But it was never to be, and I'd inevitably gone home for the night with someone who felt familiar, someone who carried the musky scent of wolf.

There were more of us living ordinary, human lives than I'd been led to believe, shunning the pack life as my parents had.

My parents . . . why had I mentioned them to Connor?

I threw my hands in the air. I'd blubbered like an idiot to him about the loss of my parents. After so many years, I should have kept the conversation light and maybe even a little flirtatious, but instead, I'd dived straight into doom and gloom and cried. The fact he said he wanted to see me again was a miracle after the way I'd behaved.

But my parents were freshly on my mind having visited the site of the shooting only two days ago, and I'd been so wrapped up in my own despair that I'd failed to ask why he'd gone to live with Lily.

Had something happened to his parents?

They were so lovely. His mom was always laughing and smiling, and his dad's car was something this car enthusiast could only dream of owning. Sure my Pontiac was a classic, but his dad's Chevy was pristine, and I'd jumped at the chance to help Connor wash and polish the car at the lake house. It was one of the few days out of the whole month where I'd had the chance to spend time with Connor without anyone scrutinizing us and watching our every move. Lily had joined in as my wing-woman, and a buffer in case things got awkward, but she made sure to let me spend as much time as I wanted with Connor. We'd sprayed each other with the hose creating muddy puddles on the previously dry ground, and he'd chased me around the car with a soapy sponge until I'd let him catch me. I was way quicker than him and so much lighter on my feet. I could have run circles around him and silently jumped over the pools of water, but I acted like an ordinary girl and squealed as he squeezed the sponge on my hair, making the soapy bubbles run down my face.

With an extra spring in my step, I left the storeroom and went back to the diner to help clean up. Casting a quick glance toward the row of booths lining the window, I was disappointed to see Connor's booth had been vacated.

"He'll be back," Rosemary said from behind the counter. I looked over at her, she had a wicked glint in her eye.

"He's dreamy." Therese sighed as she stacked the last of the stools on the counter so we could

sweep and mop the floors.

"Who is?" I couldn't meet their eyes as I feigned ignorance.

"Who, indeed." Rosemary let out a hearty laugh, and I couldn't help but join in.

I gave her a shrug. "He might come back, you never know."

"Oh, he will, and something tells me it won't be for the pie."

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# CONNOR

So, it was a bust.

I'd spent so much energy, my every waking thought on catching May, and there was no way she could be the werewolf. I was back to square one with no leads and no fucking idea where to look next. Maisie, or May as she went by now, was just a girl. An extremely pretty girl who had lived in my heart for fourteen years, but a girl, nonetheless.

I'd tossed and turned all night, playing the last town, the last full moon over and over in my head. I'd missed *something*, but whatever that something was, it was just out of reach. The truth of the matter was I'd hedged my bets on Portland because Maggie had mentioned a waitress named May. But in the end, being someone who travels around picking up odd jobs doesn't make you a werewolf. Hell, if it did, I'd be a werewolf too.

For the first time in a long time, I was at a loss. There had always been a lead, and it had kept me moving. Striving to find that next werewolf and make the next kill. My mind always humming with what to do and where to go next.

The chase.

The kill.

That fleeting feeling of satisfaction when another killing machine had been wiped from the earth, and the world was a slightly safer place. I never watched as the wolf turned back to human form. It wasn't an image I wanted in my head when I thought about the task at hand. I would shoot my arrow, and as soon as it sunk into the flesh, I would turn my back, blocking out the sounds of dying as the creature's snarls turned to whimpers and finally human groans before silence fell. Only then would I approach just long enough to retrieve my arrow from the chest of my victim. I never thought of myself as a murderer but seeing news reports of my slayings was a tough pill to swallow. Of course, the authorities and reporters didn't know what these people really were. If they did, they wouldn't mourn their lives, they would breathe a little easier knowing that they and their families were safe.

I checked the time on my phone. It was only four-fifteen, and I had a couple more hours before I needed to be up and back at the garage. Punching the pillow out of frustration, I closed my eyes and took a deep calming breath. From the bed that was once my parents, but now mine, I could hear the roar of the flowing river over the pitter-patter of rain on the window. Maybe I needed to clear my head. To lift the nagging doubts from my mind that I had no chance of catching this one, and I'd see a news bulletin regarding cattle in Texas being attacked by coyotes at the next full moon.

Sleep wasn't going to visit me, I was too wound up, so decided to get up and go for a walk down to the water's edge. The rain still fell softly, and I hunkered into my hoodie, zipping it all the way up to my chin before shrugging on my old black NorthFace winter jacket. My boots were worn, the soles

splitting from the leather and every puddle I stepped in leaked a little more muddy water into my socks.

The gently flowing lake of summers past was unrecognizable. It was now a torrent river that had risen to only a few feet from the bank, washing away the suckling plants that tried so desperately to hang on and thrive, but had failed. Perched on a rock, I nestled into my coat, shoved my hands deep into the pockets, and watched the rushing water whirl around partially submerged trees. It was cleansing, the way the swirling water washed everything away leaving crystal clear water in its place. It was forever moving, forever changing, and it reminded me that I needed to change.

Perhaps I'd been guided to Portland for a reason other than to hunt. My parents had always believed in signs and following your gut instincts. I'd trusted my gut for years, and I guess when you thought about it, every clue I'd picked up along the way had been a sign. Those signs had led me from one side of the country to the other and back again, more times than I cared to count.

Bending down, I picked up a handful of pebbles and proceeded to pitch them, one by one, into the eddying waters. With no clear leads to follow, I decided to stay in Portland and see if there really was a reason I'd been steered to the West coast. Looking back over my shoulder at the house I'd dreaded ever seeing again, I realized that maybe right where I was at that very moment in time, was the reason for being in Portland. I'd feared returning to the city and the lake house ever since the incident all those years ago. But coming back and facing my fears had made me realize that the demons I'd fought night after night, were in my head.

A twelve-year-old boy had witnessed the most gruesome act possible. While I would never forget what had happened, it was time to move on and stop looking over my shoulder at the past. Out of all the cities I could have ended up in, I was right back where this journey had begun, and so was May. We'd only had a month together the last time we were at the house, maybe this was a second chance.

Maybe May was the reason I found myself back in Portland. But not for the reason I'd first thought.

With my focus now on May the girl, not May the potential werewolf, I was determined to put my best foot forward the next time we met. As I wiped the steam from the bathroom mirror, I turned my head from side to side, assessing my new short on the sides, longer on top haircut. The hairdresser had been persistent, trying to talk me into lightening my hair with what she called foils, but the dull blond was fine with me. It may look good on some guys, but I was not a pretty-boy and never would be.

With a quick shave and a slap of cologne, it was as good as it was going to get. I found the old iron and ironing board stored away in the laundry room and attempted to iron a button-down shirt. It was over the top for a casual meal at the diner, especially as I wasn't sure May would be working. But it was Friday night, so if things went my way, maybe we'd be able to go for a drink after her shift ended.

I'd picked up a new pair of brown leather lace-up boots while I was in town getting my haircut, and my best jeans out of the two pairs I owned rounded out the outfit.

The lake house was about a half-hour drive from the diner, which was the downside of staying out of town. The upside was there wasn't a soul around, it was peaceful, and I had a full house to myself instead of the usual motel room.

The tiny bell rang as soon as I opened the door to the diner, and I smiled to myself. At least the

name of the diner was original. It could have easily been Sid's Diner, but they'd thought outside the box and named it something completely different. But the décor was familiar. Booths of red vinyl seats and white laminate tables lined the walls, tables sat side by side in the middle, and a long counter with red vinyl stools graced the back wall.

There were no free booths on this Friday night, so I found a stool at the end of the counter and made myself at home. Rosemary and Sid were in their usual places, but looking around, there was no sign of May. My heart sank. Looked like I'd be having a quick bite to eat and heading home alone after all.

"Hi, Connor. Coffee?" Rosemary had the pot in her hand. She knew me so well.

"Yeah, thanks." I took another look around. "Business is doing well by the looks of it."

Rosemary smirked, fixing me with her gaze. "She's out back on a break."

"Ah, who is? Who's on a break?" I mumbled, trying to sound like I didn't have a clue who she was referring to.

"Oh, gee, I don't know. Maybe whoever it is you keep looking over your shoulder for." She chuckled. "You're as bad as each other. She's been watching the door all evening."

"Really?" I sat up a little straighter. "Very interesting." I couldn't wipe the grin from my face. With the first hurdle of her being there conquered, I sat on the stool nervously jiggling my leg, waiting for her to come back in from a break. Finally, I felt someone walk up behind me, closing the space between us. My stomach flipped, and I resisted the urge to turn around, but a smile pulled at my cheeks.

"Hello, Red. What brings you to Portland?"

I swung around to be faced with Roland, his knowing eyes and smug face staring back at me. With a measured sigh, I tried to contain the anger rising in my gut at the sight of him. "Roland. I'm on vacation. Why are you here?"

"Oh, come now, boy. We both know we're looking for the same little girl. I believe she's a waitress"—he leaned in and lowered his voice—"with a sharp bite." He laughed at his own joke, but it was far from funny. "I had a tip-off from the diner Boulder. The same tip as you I'm guessing." If he thought May was the creature we were after, he wouldn't stop until his silver bullet had pierced her heart.

"If she was here, she's gone now." I had to hope he didn't have a name to go by or more importantly, a description. There weren't many people with eyes that were as different as night and day like May's. It would be a dead giveaway as soon as she walked back into the diner and I knew him well enough to know, that once he had her in his sights, there'd be no reasoning with him.

He planted his backside on the stool beside me. "So, we are here for the same reason. I knew it. You just want her all for yourself." He rubbed his hands together hungrily.

My palms grew sweaty, and I subtly wiped them on my jeans. "No, really. I've been here for about a week. Been to every diner and no one fits the profile." I shrugged as casually as my racing heart allowed. "But if you want to waste your time . . . go right ahead." I swept my hand out, indicating to the diner in general. "Trust me, she's not in this room."

His eyes narrowed. "If that's so, then why are you still here?"

*Good question.*

A soft hand tapped me on the shoulder, and I spun around to see Maisie standing there, gnawing on her bottom lip. "I didn't know you were coming in tonight. I could have saved you a booth."

I swiveled the stool so my back blocked Roland's view of her in case he had a description of the girl he was hunting. "No bother at all. The counter's fine with me."

"Nonsense." She glanced around the diner. "Leave it with me. I'll be back." She glided off, skirting between tables and around chairs that were pushed out too far, her movements graceful but strong and surefooted at the same time.

Smirking, I looked over at Roland. "That's why I'm still here."

There was something to be said for getting the VIP treatment. May waited on me like I was the only one there, fetching me a fresh beer every time the previous one emptied, although every time I looked in her direction, she averted her eyes and busied herself with the customer she was serving. But if I waited long enough, her focus would drift back to me, and she'd award me with a little grin. I'd decided that I'd waited long enough for this chance, so there was no playing it cool and distant. That was for the one-night stands and bathroom bangs. Maisie, rightly or wrongly, had always sat high and proud on a pedestal for me. The fact that it was fourteen years later, and she was going by the name May, didn't make a lick of difference.

I'd kept an eye on Roland, who had stayed at the counter after I'd left. He seemed overly chatty with Rosemary, and it concerned me that he was prying her for information that she may have given up without realizing. He was an ex-deputy, after all, so was skilled in interview and interrogation tactics. I knew Rosemary wouldn't knowingly put May in harm's way, she genuinely seemed to care for her, but if he asked the right questions and probed hard enough, he may come to the totally wrong conclusion.

Finally, he finished his meal and stood to leave. I didn't trust him. He and his friends had played chicken with me out in the woods, which confirmed my suspicions. He wouldn't hesitate to shoot me if it meant getting to a werewolf first.

On the spur of the moment, I decided that May's safety had to come first. Digging into my pocket, I pulled out my wallet and tossed a fifty-dollar bill on the table. My love life would have to wait. I had a new target to hunt. I needed to know where Roland was staying and if his hunter posse had followed him across the country.

I shrugged on my jacket and took a final look around for May. She was watching, a puzzled look etched across her face. I needed to leave, but not without saying goodbye. Raising my hand, I gave a little wave, and she held up her pointer finger to tell me to wait for a minute. As she finished jotting down an order, I watched taillights leave the parking lot and turn left.

I'd lost him.

"Are you leaving?" she asked as she approached, her brow furrowed.

"Well, I was just . . ." I ran my hand through my hair, bunching it on top in a fist. The parking lot was in darkness, and any hope of following Roland was lost.

"You were just what?" With one brow cocked, she waited.

"Nothing. I wasn't going anywhere."

She let out a chuckle. "I'm just messing with you. You don't have to stay if you don't want to. I just thought it might be nice to catch up?" It was a question that I didn't need to think twice about before answering.

"I was hoping the same thing." I smiled and slid back into the booth.

"Well, let me get you another beer"—she leaned over and whispered in my ear, her hot breath tickling my neck—"on the house."

Disappointment ate at my gut at missing the opportunity to follow Roland, but I couldn't deny I held my head a little higher at the memory of May asking me to stay so we could catch up. After our last meeting and her ending up in tears as she told me about her parents, I was expecting to have to talk her into spending time with me again. I was a reminder of a tragic time in her life, just as she was a reminder of a tragic time in mine.

But as I sat back in the booth and watched her race around the diner, helping clean up, I knew she was just as keen to get out of there as I was.

"Can I help?" I asked as she lifted chairs and placed them on the tables, so the floor could be mopped.

"We're not paying you, you know," Rosemary called from behind the counter as she balanced the cash register and shared out the money from tips.

I laughed and continued doing what little I could to get May out of the diner and alone. "Just the pleasure of your company is payment enough." I'd had a lot of odd jobs over the years, picking up what work I could, but I'd never worked in a diner. It always seemed like they were run off their feet having to deal with difficult customers who complained for the sake of it. "Is there anything else I can do?" I asked once all the chairs were up off the floor.

Rosemary looked at May who was gnawing on her lip again. "No, why don't you two kids get going. We can finish up here."

May beamed. "I won't be a minute." She raced off through a swinging door beside the kitchen and returned moments later, her purse tucked under one arm as she straightened the collar on a red quilted parka. "If you're sure?" she called to Rosemary but didn't wait for an answer before grabbing my arm and dragging me toward the door. "Let's go before she changes her mind," she joked.

Rosemary's voice called out as the door closed behind us. "I heard that."

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Our breaths created little puffs of steam and May cuddled into my side for warmth. I wrapped my arm loosely around her shoulders, and she huddled in tighter. "So, where should we go?" I asked, basking in the feel of her body pressed to my side.

"I don't mind. For a drink maybe?" I'd been drinking all night while I waited for May to finish, but if she wanted to drink, I'd have another. We'd reached the car, and like a gentleman, I unlocked her door and held it open for her. The realization that this was the first time someone had sat in the front passenger seat formed a lump of emotion in my throat. "Oh, my god, is this your dad's car?" She stopped, one foot in the car, one still firmly planted on the ground to look back at me.

"Yeah, it is. It's Dad's old Chevy." I'd forgotten that she'd seen the car but was surprised she'd remembered it. Most girls weren't car enthusiasts.

"I loved this car."

"You did?" Now I was even more surprised. She climbed all the way in, and I closed the door, then jogged around to the driver's side and jumped in.

"I sure did. I helped you wash it when we were at the lake house, remember? Your dad said he'd give us all five dollars each if we washed and polished it. God, we spent hours cleaning it. Well, three of us did. Dylan sat on his ass giving you a hard time." She shook her head at the memory. "He was such a jerk."

"That didn't last long. As soon as I grew half a foot taller than him and bulked up, he realized if he kept giving me a hard time, I'd knock him on his ass."

She laughed. "Well, good for you."

I pulled out of the parking lot and without thinking turned right, toward the lake house. "You know I'm staying at the house while I'm here. It looks just the same, only older and a little worse for wear. I guess we all are."

"You don't look so different." I glanced out the corner of my eye at her. "Just a bit bigger, well, a lot bigger." She laughed. "You were pretty scrawny back then."

Talk about kicking a guy in the nuts. "Ah, thanks, I guess."

She punched me playfully on the arm, then squeezed my bicep. "You didn't have these back then." That was more like it. "But you were pretty cute."

I'm no expert on the workings of the female mind, but I think in some roundabout way she'd just paid me a compliment. "I thought you said I don't look so different?"

She shrugged. "You don't."

I grinned like a fool and gave myself a virtual high five. "So, where did you want to go?" If I was heading the wrong way, there was a place to do a U-turn just up ahead. May was still in her waitress

uniform, so if we were going out, she would need to go home to change.

She spied me out of the corner of her eye. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’d really love to see the lake house again.” I couldn’t hide the smile on my face, and she shook her head at my delight. “I said, ‘don’t take this the wrong way.’”

“What?” I feigned ignorance.

She giggled, it was the most delightful sound. “Don’t think I’m going to sleep with you. This visit to the lake house is for nostalgic purposes only.”

“That thought never even crossed my mind,” I replied indignantly.

“I can see it in your eyes.” She waggled her finger at my face. “You’re a player Mr. Walsh. You don’t hear the word no very often, do you?”

She wasn’t completely wrong. I could count on one hand the number of times I’d been turned down, but in this case, with this girl, I was willing to wait for as long as it took. “I’m just happy to spend time with you, Maisie … ah, I mean, May.” That was going to take some getting used to. For fourteen years, she’d been Maisie. In my memories and my daydreams, always Maisie.

We pulled up to the house, and May let out an audible gasp. “Oh, man. You’re right, it hasn’t changed. It’s exactly how I remember it.” She climbed out of the car and into the rain, her gaze never leaving the house as she took in every detail. “I’ve been to Portland a few times over the years and always wanted to come back but couldn’t remember where the house was.” She turned to face the water. “I can hear the lake from here. It’s beautiful.”

She was beautiful. The way she stood there, letting the rain soak into her hair and over her puffy parka, the droplets running down her face to sit for a moment on her lips, only to spill over and get lost between them.

I could stand there watching her for a lifetime, but I was worried with only tights covering her legs, she’d be freezing. “Let’s go in.” I took her hand, and we ran up the front steps and onto the verandah where it was dry. My hands were frozen, and I fumbled with the keys before finding the lock and opening the door. “Make yourself comfortable while I build a fire.” I indicated to the over-stuffed couch, but she remained by the door, dripping onto the hardwood floor. “Towel first?”

She chuckled. “Good idea.”

There were no clothes other than my own, so as May dried off in the bathroom, I rummaged through my drawers for something to give her. I had plenty of t-shirts and long sleeve tees, and I picked one up, thinking that how in all the movies, the girl would inevitably prance around in a t-shirt that barely covered her ass. But I wanted May to feel comfortable, so found a sloppy sweater and sweatpants for her to change into.

May raided my uncle’s red wine collection and made herself at home searching through cupboards and drawers in the kitchen until she’d found a corkscrew and glasses while I changed into dry clothes.

The house was cold with its vaulted ceiling and open-plan living, so I stacked logs on top of crumpled paper in the hearth and set about building a fire to warm the place. Luckily, I’d collected wood and kindling while it was still dry outside, and I sorted through the pile of cut logs and basket of twigs, but I’d never been an expert on building a fire.

“Here, let me help.” I moved aside, and May took over. Within a few minutes the flames were roaring, emitting heat and a warm glow into the room.

“Now that’s impressive,” I told her as we relaxed on the couch, and I poured the wine. May tucked her feet up underneath her, sinking further into the cushions. “Were you a Girl Guide or something?” I joked.

She rolled her eyes at me. “I can look after myself. I used to camp with my parents all the time and they taught me a lot. I still love camping even now. There’s nothing like being immersed in nature, away from everything and everyone.” She took a sip of wine, studying me from over the rim of her glass. “So, you mentioned the other day that you went to live with your uncle and aunt.” I took a drink and steadied my breathing. “Did something happen to your parents?”

“My parents were killed the night we left the house to go home.” I couldn’t hold off the slight tremble in my voice as I said the word *killed*. I may be a big guy with a tough exterior, but I would never get used to talking about the night I lost them.

“Oh, my god. What happened?”

How much could I tell her? Certainly not the truth.

“We had a puncture. I think Dad said he’d run over something on the road. Anyway, they got out to fix it, and”—I hesitated. What could I say?—“they were attacked on the side of the road. The police thought it was wild dogs maybe.”

She sat bolt upright. The wine in the glass vibrated, and I knew she was trembling. “Where did this happen . . . exactly?”

“Maybe an hour from here on the woods road.”

“And you didn’t see what it was that attacked them? What the . . . dogs looked like?”

Boy, this was getting uncomfortable. I hated lying to her but what could I say? *‘Yeah, sure, they were werewolves, and I’m a crazy person.’* “No, I was stretched out on the back seat. When I heard the commotion, I hid.” I couldn’t meet her eyes. “I know, big tough Connor was so brave. I hid while my parents were ripped to shreds.”

“No, you did the right thing.” She reached out, placing her still trembling hand over mine. “So, wild dogs, but no one saw what they looked like?”

“No, I didn’t see anything.” I couldn’t figure out why she was so interested in what had killed my parents. And then it hit me. Her parents spent a lot of time in the woods camping, and she’d said they moved around a lot. Now May was always on the move never staying anywhere more than a month or so. They’d taught her to look after herself. To build a fire, and I bet she was handy with a gun or crossbow.

There was only one explanation. They were hunters, and now she had taken up the cause and continued the arduous lifestyle in their honor.

That must be why they were camping in the woods near the lake house. If they’d tracked the werewolves to that location, they would have been happy to let May stay at the house and out of harm’s way while they hunted. A great wave of relief washed over me, and a feeling that this chance meeting was meant to be. I’d never met a girl who would be able to handle my lifestyle. I looked into her eyes. There was so much compassion gazing back at me, and I knew without a shadow of a doubt . . . she knew.

She knew what had killed my parents. It was probably the same pair of werewolves that her parents were tracking. If only they had caught the creatures, my parents would have survived. But how had her parents died? She said they were shot. Could they have been accidentally shot by another hunter tracking the same animals? There were so many questions that I desperately needed answers to.

“I’m so terribly sorry, Connor.” Tears filled her eyes. “I can’t”—she sniffed back the tears, wiping her eyes with the cuff of my sweater—“I can’t tell you how awful I feel about what happened. Oh, God . . .” Her hand went to her mouth. “I’m so, so sorry.” Tears streamed down her cheeks. She leaned forward to place her glass on the coffee table, then abruptly stood and hightailed it into the

bathroom.

It was a relief to be able to talk to someone about what had happened and although I hadn't told her the details, from her reaction it was clear she knew how brutal these beasts were and how they killed without mercy. Maybe one day I'd be able to say the words 'they were killed by werewolves' but for now, just knowing that she understood was enough.

Gazing into the fire as the flames danced and twisted together, I ran my theory of her being a hunter over in my mind once again, until ten minutes later May emerged from the bathroom, an embarrassed closed-lipped grin on her blotchy face. "Wow, I'm sorry about that. Don't know what came over me. I guess I can relate to you losing your parents because I lost mine that same weekend."

"It's hard to believe, isn't it?" I topped up her glass and passed it to her.

"At least you had family to stay with, although I know no one can replace your real parents." That was true. I had been lucky that my uncle and aunt were so willing to take me in. They treated me like the third child they never had and were so patient and understanding when night after night I'd awake screaming from the nightmares that plagued me.

"Did you have family?" What had happened to the girl I'd met after we'd pulled out of the driveway? My last memory of her was watching through the rear window as she and Lily waved goodbye.

She shook her head. "Not really. I have a grandma on my mom's side, but she was living off the grid, so I went into the system." From the way she gulped her wine, I guessed going into the system was a bad thing. I waited for her to continue. Finally, she raised her focus from the wine glass and sighed heavily. "Do you want the whole tragic tale?" Her tone was melancholy.

"I don't have anywhere to be tonight." I wriggled back into the couch, tucking one leg under the other.

May finished her drink in one final gulp, then refilled the glass. "Okay, you asked for it. I bounced from foster home to foster home. Five in total in that first year."

"That's appalling after everything you went through."

"Oh, it wasn't all their fault. I was . . . acting out, I guess you'd call it. Getting into fights at school or skipping school completely. I was suspended twice, made the poor family's lives a living nightmare. I was just so angry all the time." She met my eyes. "You know? I couldn't control that rage that burned through me, and I took it out on everyone around me."

"I don't blame you. You'd just lost your parents and were expected to live with strangers. Hell, I'd be angry too."

She smiled, appreciation in her eyes. "Finally, they found my grandma in Louisiana, and she was more than happy to take me in."

"That's great." I was happy she could be with family.

"Yeah, well. She lives in a secluded . . . ah . . . commune-type situation, and"—she picked at lint on the sweatpants—"it's *different* to anywhere I'd lived before." When I thought of communes, I pictured hippies and free love. Communal gardens and everyone sitting around a campfire singing 'Kumbaya'. Not an entirely bad way to live.

"When we bumped into each other at the diner you asked if I was from Clear Water Falls." She nodded. "You looked scared." I tried to gauge her reaction, but she held the perfect poker face.

"Clear Water Falls is where the commune was located. It was more like a cult. There was one leader, Rudy, and everyone bowed down to him. He had his seconds in command, who pulled everyone into line by whatever means necessary." She scoffed. "After what I'd been through, being restricted to that sort of mentality was the last thing I needed."

I suddenly felt overprotective of May. “What means did they use to pull you into line?” Something must have happened there. When we’d met at the diner she wasn’t just scared, she was downright petrified.

She shrugged off the question, raising her wine glass to her lips. “I fared better than some, I got out.” Her poker face slipped long enough for me to see the torment behind her eyes. “There was an initiation for the girls. Rudy liked to . . .” She trailed off, wiping her hand across her forehead.

“He what?” I pressed, picturing worst-case scenario and what I would do to Rudy if I ever came face to face with him.

“He wanted to be their first. Make them his. I knew my turn was coming because I was almost of age, and I also knew that no one would do anything to stop it.”

“Not even your grandma?” I couldn’t wrap my head around how anyone could stand back and allow something like that to happen.

May shook her head slowly. “She’d been through a similar thing when she was a girl. It was considered normal, a rite of passage to be initiated into the community.”

“Jesus, that’s fucked up.”

“Yeah, it is. So, I ran. One night when it was pelting down with rain, I snuck out. I knew the noise of the rain hitting the tin roofs would mask any sound I made clambering over the barbed wire fence. Man . . .” She shook her head. “I was cut up and bleeding. My lungs burned. But I never looked back. I was so scared if I did, I’d see Rudy and his bloodhounds chasing me down.”

“And you’ve been running ever since.” Maybe I’d been wrong about why she moved around so much. If she thought Rudy’s sidekicks were scouring the country looking for her to take her back to that sick cult she’d been forced to live in, I couldn’t blame her for never staying put.

She nodded. “It’s not so bad. I like to keep moving, that way no one can find you.” She shrugged resignedly.

“I found you.”

She nibbled her bottom lip then gave me a sly smile. “It took you long enough. I’ve been waiting fourteen years to see you again.”

We continued talking well into the night until the rain finally stopped its persistent pitter-patter against the slate roof.

Just talked, nothing else.

I’d never talked so much in my life or listened so intently. I wanted to know everything about May. Her foster homes and what she’d been through since she ran from the commune. I had visions of her living on the streets, but I needn’t have worried, she was resourceful and indeed able to look after herself.

“As long as I had a tent, I knew I’d be okay,” she said. “That and a handy hunting knife.”

I nodded knowingly. My trunk filled with weapons was locked safely under my bed, with the crossbow and a few arrows in the closet for good measure should I need access to them quickly.

May had traveled as much as I had, crossing the country and living by her wits. She’d waitressed mainly but had worked in a grocery store and even tried her hand as a house painter. Her life to this point had been fascinating and varied, but I knew there was more she wasn’t telling me. That was fine. She was keeping her cards close to her chest for the reason she never stayed put, and I

understood why. I had never told anyone why I continued to drift from city to city, packing up and taking off at the spur of the moment. Gran was the only one who knew, and she'd figured it out on her own.

I would let May keep her secret for as long as she needed to. When the time was right, and she felt comfortable enough to tell me, I would finally open up and tell someone mine.

Clear Water Falls was a sore point that she was reluctant to talk about. I didn't want to push, but if she was worried about Rudy's men finding her, it would be to her advantage if I knew what I'd be dealing with. I had no doubt May could fend for herself, but fighting hand to hand was my forte. I was a sixth dan blackbelt, only three levels away from a Grand Master, with the drive and bottled anger to beat the hell out of someone if they got in my way. Over the last five years, I'd learned to control my inner rage and channel it toward hunting. But after I'd left my aunt and uncle's home at the tender age of eighteen, I'd used my skills, fueled by a sense of the world owing me something, to pick as many bar fights as I could find.

The bigger the better, the more the merrier. I'd find the biggest, meanest-looking guy and deliberately provoke him. If he had mates with him, then that was fine by me. It wasn't until I'd ended up in hospital with a suspected skull fracture after a guy had crept up behind me and smashed a chair over my head that it finally sunk in.

The doctor had taken one look at me and asked if I had a death wish. After considering the question for a full minute because it was the same question I'd often asked myself, I answered with a firm 'no'. That was a turning point for me. Maybe years of therapy could have come to the same conclusion without a visit to hospital, but a chair over the head did the trick just as well.

I felt I had something to prove. To show anyone who cared to see that I wasn't a coward who hid, sheltered under a red hoodie on the floor of a car. I hadn't saved my parents, but I needed to focus my anger, to channel it toward the creatures who had taken them from me and not every Neanderthal in a bar.

Even though I'd finally come to the realization myself and had subsequently avoided conflict—partly to prove to myself I didn't need to fight, and partly because I feared what might happen if I let go—I had no qualms in defending May if it came down to it.

"What are you thinking about?" May asked, head tilted to the side. "I know you're not listening to a word I'm saying."

"How do you know I'm not listening?"

"Firstly, it's that furrowed brow of yours." She reached out and ran her fingertips across my forehead. "And secondly, because I just told you I'd spent six weeks living on Mars with a delightful colony of aliens who looked like bumble bees with cow udders."

"Well, obviously that's why I was frowning." She laughed, and I searched my memory in case something she'd said had gotten through. Nothing had. "Sorry." I grimaced. "I guess I kinda got caught up in my own thoughts. Our lives have traveled down parallel roads. I wish I'd known you were wandering from city to city, we could have drifted together."

"Oh, my god!" She'd been leaning back into the cushions, head resting in her palm, but she sat up and started . . . pulling at the waist of the sweatpants.

"Ah, okay. Did I just say something to turn you on? 'Cos, I wish I'd said it sooner."

She let out a hearty laugh and slapped my leg. "No, I wanted to show you this. You said 'drift' . . . look." Tugging the pants down on the left side, she exposed her hip. There was a tattoo of a maple tree with fall leaves blowing from its branches in the wind. Below the image in a cursive script read *Drift on the wind wherever it blows until you find a place to land.*

“That’s really beautiful.” So was the slender curve of her thigh and milky white skin. I wanted to touch the tattoo, to run my fingers over it, but I resisted. Some leaves drifted up to her left butt cheek, so in effect I’d be fondling her ass.

“Thanks.” She quickly covered up like it was nothing at all, but the image of her supple hip stayed with me. No matter how much we chatted like old friends, I wanted to be so much more.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# CONNOR

A gentle hot breath against my neck heated my otherwise freezing body. Sometime after five, I'd lost the fight to keep my eyes open. A warm, comfortable bed was only feet away, but it would have been too presumptuous to suggest we climb into it, so instead, we cuddled together on the couch. May's left leg was tucked between mine, her arm slung over my chest. With every exhale her breath wheezed softly. I closed my eyes and listened, counting the seconds between each breath, each little sound.

Straining to see the clock on the wall, I was surprised we'd slept for five hours cramped on the couch. But what surprised me more was the realization I hadn't had one single dream. Resting my head back on the cushion, I ran my right hand through my hair. My left arm was numb from being used as a pillow, but I was reluctant to move it, not wanting to wake the slumbering May.

Finally, she stirred, wiping her cheek with the heel of her hand before lifting her head to examine the wet patch on my shirt. "Oops, sorry."

She looked up at me through bleary eyes and crinkled her freckled nose. It was adorable. "Do you have to work today?" I asked, hoping the answer would be no.

Pausing for a moment, she hummed softly. "What day is it again?" She giggled. "I have no idea."

"It's Saturday, and it's"—I checked the clock again—"half past ten."

"What?" She sat bolt upright. "Crap, I'm on the lunch shift." Springing over me, she landed silently on the floorboards. "I need my uniform."

I stayed put, chuckling as May raced off to the bedroom to gather her belongings. "Do you have time for coffee?" I called as May cursed under her breath while scurrying to the bathroom.

"If it's quick . . . and to go." She was ready at the same time the coffee was brewed, and I poured it into two travel mugs. "Sorry to rush out." Holding out one mug, she collected it from my hand as she swept past.

I followed behind, snatching up the car keys and pulling the door closed behind us. "Are you working tonight as well?"

"Unfortunately, yes, it's our busiest night." She took a sip of coffee and glanced up at me from over the rim of the cup. "Ah, this is good." Steam wafted from the cup, and she closed her eyes, inhaling deeply. "I'm free tomorrow though." Her eyes flashed, a mischievous grin not quite hidden by the cup. "If you're interested."

As much as I'd wanted to take up residence at the diner, I knew I needed to give May some space. So, we arranged to meet up the following day and spend it at the lake house and exploring the woods. May insisted on finding her own way instead of me picking her up, so I'd wait, impatiently pacing the floor and tidying up areas that were already tidy.

My phone buzzed at nine a.m. with a text message, and I pounced on it like a lion catching its next meal. It was Logan asking if I was free the following day to work a full day as an actual mechanic instead of a first-year apprentice, as there was a classic Pontiac GTO booked in for a service.

I quickly replied back, 'hell yeah'. The money couldn't come at a better time. Although I was living rent-free at the lake house, I still needed food and a little extra to take May out if we decided to head in that direction and drop the friend label.

Finally, she pulled up out the front of the house in a classic Pontiac GTO, and I couldn't hide the grin on my face. Flinging open the front door with a little too much enthusiasm for someone who was supposed to be cool, I trotted down the front steps to greet her and check out the car.

It was in reasonable condition, and I let out a low whistle, surveying the car and the beautiful girl who climbed from the driver's seat. "Well, aren't you full of surprises?"

"You like?" Her smile was infectious as she stepped back, sweeping her arm toward the car. "It belonged to my parents. I guess that's something else we have in common." She stepped toward me, bridging the gap between us, and kissed my cheek softly.

"So, you really do like classic cars?" I slung my arm around her shoulders, tucking her petite frame into my side. "You wouldn't happen to have your car booked in for a service tomorrow, would you?"

"Oh wow, spooky." She giggled. "Do you know the lotto numbers too?"

I laughed. "No, unfortunately, but I do know who'll be doing the service."

We huddled together as we ascended the stairs, up the verandah, and into the house. The rain had held off overnight, so the ground wasn't too muddy, and the sun looked to be making a valiant attempt to poke its head through the white cloud cover above.

"Should we go for a walk now or chance it later?" I knew the next downpour could be only moments away. At this time of year, the weather was unpredictable.

She groaned. "Coffee first, please?" I refilled the pot and set it to brew. We moved around the kitchen like a synchronized dance. Neither needing to speak to know exactly what the other was doing. I grabbed the milk from the fridge, her hand was already held out in my direction to take it. I passed a teaspoon at the same time she took the sugar bowl from the pantry. May giggled to herself when I took a packet of muffins from the cupboard and turned to find a serving plate already on the counter. She shrugged, her eyes sparkling as I shook my head in disbelief.

We were in tune, and it made the simple tasks even easier.

It was nearly eleven a.m. before we filled the travel mugs with another round of coffee and donned our coats and beanies to venture into the woods.

May had mentioned that she loved hiking, camping, and being surrounded by nature, but I had no idea how adept she was as we found overgrown paths that led toward a rocky outcrop. I'd spent years hunting in dense woods, but she kept up with me easily, and at times stopped, surveyed the surroundings, and found a hidden track that was a quicker route.

"Do you smell that?" May stopped, senses on high alert. "I think there are deer around here."

I sniffed the air. There was a faint scent of deer urine that hunters sometimes use to mask their scent, but I would never have picked it up if she hadn't pointed it out. "You have a good nose."

"I told you I can look after myself. I camp. I hunt." She shrugged. "You learn to survive when you have to."

We continued on, and I fell behind, allowing the surefooted May to decide the course we would take. Every so often she would stop to pick leaves or flowers, telling me the botanical names and what the plants could be used for. Where she'd garnered this knowledge I had no idea, it was yet another mystery I hoped May would one day share with me. Eventually, the thick underbrush thinned, and we came out at a clearing. "Oh, this is perfect," she said on a sigh. "I'll have to come back to this spot and camp one day." We'd kept the rocky ridge to our left and come out at a point where it met the water's edge. The clearing was sheltered by the rocks and close enough to the river to provide fresh flowing water for cooking, bathing, or swimming if it was warmer weather.

"We used to play in the woods all the time when I was a kid, but we never ventured this far away from the house."

"I don't think many people would." She looked at her phone. "We've been walking for nearly an hour and haven't passed another living soul." May gazed around in wonder, and I watched with a sly smile at how captivated she was. "I could definitely spend some time here in the summer. Pitch a tent, catch some fish or hunt." She turned and pointed to the looming rock wall. "The rocks provide shelter if needed. And protection." Her hands ran through her hair, interlocking behind her head. "Just perfect," she whispered.

"Should we take a closer look at the rocks?" I asked softly, not wanting to startle her from the thoughts that consumed her.

She nodded, a huge smile lighting up her face as she grabbed my hand and led the way.

Who says guys can't multitask? I could spend time hiking with May, being one with nature which she loved, and scope out the terrain for potential caves that the werewolf might hide in at the next full moon. Not that I knew for sure that the creature would be in a cave, but from Colorado and the evidence that it had fed in a cave while it healed, if it was a creature of habit, then it was a possibility.

From a distance, the rock face looked solid, but as we drew near, I could see small caves scattered throughout. May wanted to explore further, and I was happy to oblige. I wanted to see if there was any sign of wildlife making these caverns their home and if they were deep enough for a werewolf to hide in. It was always better to be prepared than to chase one down and be trapped, turning from hunter to prey.

As we moved along, May skipped over the rocks effortlessly. "You remind me of a mountain goat," I called in jest as she stopped to wait for me in front of a large opening.

"You're not doing too badly yourself, for a big guy." That was the difference. May was light, not only on her feet but physically, making it easier for her to carry herself along. My saving grace was height. I may be twice her size, but my long muscular legs powered over the rocks she glided over.

"This cave looks a bit bigger. I wonder how far back it goes." I could see maybe twenty feet in before total darkness shielded the depth from view.

"Let's find out." May took a step forward, then stopped. "Be careful, Connor. There could be something in there." I glanced over my shoulder to see a frown painted across her forehead. Reaching down, I pulled a concealed silver dagger from my boot. "What is that?" She asked, eyeing the intricate dagger with interest.

"It's a dagger . . . a knife. I thought I'd bring something to protect us just in case we came across a wild animal."

She edged closer. "It's pretty." Taking my wrist in her hand, she turned it over to examine the dagger more closely. "It looks antique. Is it . . . silver?"

Smiling, I flipped it over in my hand to show the etching on the handle, worn in places from years

of handling. “Yep, I picked it up at an antique store a few years back. It’s perfectly balanced. Here . . .” I held it out to her, but she shook her head and took a step back.

“It’s okay, I can see how pretty it is from here.” May took a few cautious steps into the cave, stepping over small rocks and dodging jagged edges that hung down low.

Cursing my stupidity as I stubbed my toe against a sharp rock, I muttered under my breath, “I should have brought a torch.”

May giggled. “I brought one, but it’s only small.” She stopped and pulled a penlight from her red parka pocket. “You can use it, I have excellent night vision.”

I shone the light in front of us, whether May needed it or not, and kept the dagger in my other hand just in case something inside the cave was waiting to pounce. At the back of the cave, it opened up to a decent-sized enclosure with a ceiling high enough that I could stand comfortably fully upright.

It was perfect. Perfect for a predator to hide out in and bring its kill. Not so perfect if the animal came in behind you because there was only one way out. Shining the torch up, I marveled at the crystals sparkling in the rock face. This cave at one time must have been a wet cave, the water creating calcification in the cracks of the surface.

“May, look at this. It’s so beautiful.” I’d found a particularly large area that glistened when the torchlight hit it. “May . . .” Looking over my shoulder, I found her by the far wall. She’d found evidence of life in the cave, but not animal, this was human. “What’s that?” I flicked the torch toward two rucksacks, sleeping bags, and a circle of rocks surrounding a burnt-out fire that had turned to ash.

Crouching down, May held her hand over the firepit. “Still a little warm. Probably a couple of hours old,” she muttered. “But their stuff’s here so they’ll be back.” Grabbing one of the rucksacks, she swung it around to examine a symbol drawn on the top flap with a black magic marker. “Son of a bitch.” She jumped up, her face contorted with fear. “Connor, we have to go . . . now.”

“What is it?” I tried to rest my hand on her shoulder to comfort her, but she jerked away.

“Now, Connor.” She wasn’t waiting for me to agree or argue as the red of her parka disappeared from the expanse of the torch’s glow, and toward the cave’s entrance.

Hesitating for a second, I wanted to see what had spooked her so much. Bending down, I looked at the symbol that had filled her with dread. It was four jagged, diagonal stripes. I didn’t know the logo, but it looked like claw marks, similar to those adorning the skin across my back.

I needed to find May. The etching had freaked her out so much that she’d run from the cave without waiting for me. As quickly as possible, I put the bag back where we’d found it and raced out after her. When I reached the cave entrance, I scoured the area. Down by the riverbank, a figure paced back and forth with hands planted on hips.

It was May.

“Hey,” I called upon my approach. “What happened in there?”

“Sorry.” She puffed, eyes darting around, taking in everything at once. “We need to leave here before they come back.”

“Before who comes back?” I tucked the dagger back in my boot and shoved the torch into my pocket before placing both hands on her shoulders. “Who do the bags belong to, May?”

“Rudy’s men.” Tears filled her eyes. “I can’t believe they’ve found me already. I need to go, to keep moving.”

“Hold on a minute. You can’t keep running. Maybe it’s time to face them and let them know once and for all that you’re not going back.”

“You don’t understand, Connor. They have a job to do. To take me back to the . . . commune, and they are relentless.”

We needed to go, that much I understood. If they came back while we were out in the open, they would have the upper hand. "We can talk it through back at the house, but for now, let's get you away from here." I expected we'd go back the way we'd come, but to my surprise, May jogged to the water's edge and turned toward home, her pace unyielding. She was in incredible physical shape, running along the bank, scrambling over rocks, and dodging branches that stuck out over the non-existent track we were forging.

When the house was in sight, we turned a sharp right, our stride only slowing when we were on the front verandah, and I paused to search my pocket for keys. Once inside, I expected the panic to subside, it didn't. May paced the length of the living room while I built a fire.

"I need to leave, Connor." She shook her head, then buried her face in her hands. "I wish . . . I wish I could stop running, but you have no idea what these people are like."

"So tell me." Taking her hand, I guided her to the sofa.

Her head flopped back into the soft cushions. "I need a drink first." With eyes closed, she inhaled deeply and puffed it out.

We were lucky my uncle had a fully stocked wine collection because I had a feeling this would be a two-bottle conversation. By the time I'd opened the bottle, found glasses and some cheese and crackers to nibble on, May's breathing was back to normal.

"The rucksack I looked at is Landon's, and I'm guessing the other one belongs to Aiden. They're twins, but not identical, and they go everywhere together. Landon's the biggest." She assessed me from the corner of her eye. "Probably about your height and build. Aiden is a little runt but mean to the bone." The wine was going down like water, but there was plenty more if needed. "Everyone at the commune joked that they were like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito in Twins. They were so different to look at." I scoffed. One big guy and a runt would be a piece of cake. "But what Aiden lacks in muscle, he makes up for in cunning and basic brutality."

"You know I can fight. I could easily take on Landon."

"Yeah, but can you take on someone who is twisted as fuck? Who derives a sick sense of pleasure from inflicting pain on others?" She gave me a tight-lipped smile. "Aiden's the one you have to watch out for."

I had my weapons, the crossbow and knives if it came to that. But even without my hunting tools, I could kick just about anyone's ass if push came to shove. And protecting May had suddenly just become my number one priority.

"I'll take my chances. And in the meantime, you can stay here." *Where did that come from?*

"You don't understand. These guys don't back down, and they don't fight fair. They're callous and ruthless. It won't just be a fight, it'll be a fight to the death, and I can't put you in danger, Connor. It's better if I leave town and get as far away from here as possible." She smirked. "Besides, where would I sleep if I stayed here? We can't cuddle together on the couch every night."

I couldn't convince May that staying with me at the lake house was the best option. In my mind, keeping her close by was the only way to keep her safe, but for her, getting as far away as possible was the only way to keep me safe. My safety was secondary. For the rest of the afternoon, May gnawed relentlessly on her bottom lip and gazed into the fire, lost in thought as the flames licked at the blackening logs. She needed her space, so while I sat beside her, ready to talk, I didn't push any further for her to stay with me. The last thing I wanted was to push so hard that she'd run from me as well.

"Are you hungry?" It was close to seven, and all we'd had to fill our bellies was wine and nibbles.

Her stomach growled, and she chuckled. “I could eat, I guess.”

I’d had a few glasses of red wine, but May had consumed the majority of the second bottle as she pondered her future. “Why don’t I go grab us a pizza while you build up the fire again.”

She nodded. “Sounds good.” A forced smile pushed at her cheeks, but her eyes were masked in anguish.

Zipping up the red hoodie, I layered a thick, insulated jacket over the top. The sky was still clear, which meant it was icy cold outside. “I won’t be long.” I snatched up the keys from the kitchen counter, then turned to May. “You will still be here when I get back, won’t you?”

May nodded her response, but I had to wonder if I’d return to an empty house.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

After Connor left, I paced the floor. I'd promised him I'd still be here when he returned with the pizza, but my first instinct was to grab my stuff and get the fuck outta there.

Landon and Aiden were in Portland … they'd found me. There was no way it was a coincidence they'd made their way across the country to not only the state I was in but to a cave not even an hour's hike away. I thought I'd been so clever, zigzagging across the country always covering my tracks, but the thing with werewolves was that once they had your scent, they could track you to the end of the earth.

I should have known, Rudy, the Alpha of my grandma's pack wouldn't let me go that easily. I was pureblood, born and raised a shifter, granddaughter to a skilled healer, and that was a highly desirable mate for any wolf.

I'd paced so much I swear I was wearing a track in the floorboards. I needed to think, but my brain was scattered and unable to focus in any one clear direction. Slumping into the couch, I let the flames dancing in the fireplace take my memory back to life with the pack.

*When I'd first been placed with Grandma after she'd been found living off the grid, I'd been happy to have other shifters around me. Growing up with my parents openly shifting in front of me, I was no stranger to the bone-crunching, flesh-ripping sounds that accompanied the change, but what I hadn't been ready for on that first full moon with the pack was the debauchery that followed between the young wolves who were yet to find their mate. Sure, the sight of dozens of men and women stripping naked, awaiting the rising moon had made my skin blush, I was only thirteen after all, but I was definitely not prepared for the pack's beast-like behavior, led by Rudy.*

*All human nature was cast aside as they allowed their animal instincts to come forth. I'd hidden myself away, not yet having changed for the first time, but no longer a child either.*

*Running to the barn, I'd climbed to the loft and pressed my back to the furthest corner. If I'd had any inkling of what had been about to happen, I might have taken a blanket, a book, or even snacks. But as it was, I felt like I'd barely escaped with my life and limbs intact.*

*A rustling below had me scrunched hard against the rough wooden wall before the heavy door was pulled open and a soft voice echoed in the empty space of the deserted barn.*

*"Hello? May, are you in here?" I recognized the voice straight away, it belonged to Sybil. She was a year older than me but had been a small baby so was shorter and much frailer.*

*"Up here," I called. "Quick, climb up before anyone sees you."*

*While I had scaled the ladder to the loft in mere seconds, the muscles in my arms and legs working like well-oiled machines, it took Sybil a lot of grunting and considerable effort before her head finally poked over the top rung of the ladder to where I was waiting.*

*"Phew, there's my workout for the week." She laughed, awkwardly climbing the remainder of the way.*

*"Are you sure you're a wolf?" I joked, noting her flushed face and labored breath.*

*"Only half, and I'm a twin. I'll be the Omega, the runt of the litter in the pack. But at least I'll have a home." She gave a shrug, and I smiled in understanding. My parents had taught me that pureblood was by far superior so being only half-blood already had her at a disadvantage. Add to that the twin factor and that was two strikes against her. Sybil would always be the weakest and therefore most expendable in the pack. She would be lucky if Rudy allowed her to be matched with her mate, and inevitably, her bloodline would die out.*

*Sybil's eyes were wide as she watched the events playing out below. "That will be us soon."*

*My head shook in denial. That wasn't me. I wouldn't be humping and biting every male pack member.*

*"I heard Rudy beds all the new wolves when they come of age. Both in wolf form and human." The tremor in Sybil's voice was clear.*

*"Ha! That's what he thinks."*

*Sybil turned to look at me. "You don't have a choice, May. It's to seal the Alpha bond."*

*Sitting back on my heels, I took her hands in mine. "He can't make you do anything you don't want to do."*

*"But it's part of the ritual."*

*"Oh, yeah? Is it part of the ritual for the boys too? Or just the young, pretty girls?"*

*She hesitated, her brows drawn together.*

*"Exactly! It's not to seal the Alpha bond, that's done with the sharing of blood. It's a dirty-old-man ritual where Rudy takes advantage of us."*

*She squeezed my hands. "Whether you agree with it or not, it's pack law. If you don't abide, you will be made an example of, ostracized from the pack, then hunted down and killed. Please, May, I know you were raised differently where your pack was your parents, and you lived a mostly human existence, but please don't fight this."*

*I smiled reassuringly and shuffled back to rest against the rough wood. My mind had been made up long before tonight. Yes, I had been raised differently. My parents had drummed into me that I had free will. My body, my choice. I had the final say on who I let into my life and in what capacity. It was a human way of thinking, but I had been surrounded by humans so thought those rules applied to all. Coming to live at Clear Water Falls with the Wolf Claw Pack was eye-opening in the worst possible way.*

*Maybe this was why my parents had left? Their teachings were so different from the ways of the pack.*

*"May?" Sybil's soft voice broke through my thoughts. "Promise me when your time comes, you won't fight him."*

*"I promise, Sybil. He won't make an example of me."*

*I'll be long gone.*

*We'd hidden in the loft until the moon had descended and the sun had once again kissed the sky, and from that first night, we'd become inseparable.*

*Maybe life with the pack wasn't going to be all bad. For as long as I remained, I now had a*

*best friend who was just like me. We were wolf pups united in uncertainty, excitement, and a healthy amount of fear. Fear of the unknown and what our lives would become. Fear of Rudy and his Betas, Landon and Aiden. Fear of our first transformation and the sacred mystery no one would speak of. But mostly fear of being separated and once again being left to fend for ourselves.*

*Life with the pack had finally taken a turn, and other than the chores we were given which seemed to date back to the 1800s, like fetching water from the river, making candles which were our only source of light, and using a washboard and a load of muscle-power to clean clothes, our lives were relatively carefree—until they weren't.*

*Three years after we had hidden in the loft that first time, Sybil began showing signs that her first change was imminent. Immense fits of rage over the most minor of things had her eyes flaring yellow and a deep, guttural growl emanating from her gut. She couldn't control it no matter how hard she tried, feeling as if the wolf deep within was attempting to burst free from its human confines.*

*Sybil was kept away from the rest of the pack, supposedly for our own protection, but whispers overheard in my grandma's cabin spoke of something far more sinister.*

*She was being prepared, but for what, I wasn't exactly sure.*

*Finally summoning the courage to ask, I approached my grandma. "What's happening with Sybil? Why can't I see her? She would never hurt me."*

*My grandma hesitated for a moment, evidently weighing up her options and how much to share with me before a heavy sigh slumped her shoulders, and she pulled me to sit on the threadbare couch in her cabin.*

*"You know Sybil is only half-blood and weak at that." I nodded. "Rudy will induct her into the wolf pack as he does every new female, but instead of being allowed to find her mate and form that lasting bond, she will be made available to any unmated male wolf."*

*Blood boiled in my veins as her words hung heavily. "You mean Rudy will pimp her out to anyone who wants her?" I knew Rudy was a sadistic, foul creature, but as the Alpha, it was his duty to provide a safe and stable environment for his pack—obviously that didn't extend to Sybil.*

*"I'm not sure what you mean by pimp her out, May. Rudy will take what is rightfully his, and then as Alpha, he will ensure his single males have an outlet for their . . . male urges. It's a way to keep the males from ripping each other's throats out. It's how things have been done by our kind for generations," she justified.*

*"It's not right, he doesn't own her," I yelled, standing and clenching my fists at my side.*

*"That's where you're wrong. He does own her, just as he owns you." I balked at her statement. Would this also be my fate? Grandma must have seen my fury as she raised her hand to stop my thoughts.*

*"Don't worry, May. You are pureblood and my granddaughter. Your mate bond will be strong and hopefully with someone of rank, possibly Landon or Aiden."*

*My stomach turned at the prospect of having to spend my life with either of those vile creatures. Surely if one of them was my mate I would already know. Rumors of the pull toward one's mate were often talked of among the women. But when I thought of them my stomach turned and not in the lovesick butterfly way, but in the violent I-want-to-rip-out-your-heart kind of way. There was no way I would succumb to either. There would be a blood bath the first time either one of them tried to lay a hand on me.*

*"I will not be mated with either of them." My grandma went to speak, but I stopped her with a steely glare. "I will not be mated with anyone. I wouldn't wish this curse on my worst enemy. The*

*thought of having children who have to endure the agony of transformation every month. The isolation of never staying in one place long enough to make friends and have a real life . . . the constant looking over your shoulder in fear of being hunted. It's all too much."*

*"It's only like that if you live in the human world. If you stay with us, you can have the life you wish for yourself." She spread her arms wide in a 'look at everything we have gesture'. All I saw was dirt, huts, and people trying to survive in a community that time had long forgotten. "You can be your true self here, May. Let your inner-beast free to roam, to hunt, to kill if you wish."*

*"And rut like rabid dogs every full moon."*

*She pursed her lips at me, disappointed. "If that's what you wish, then yes, you can do that too. At least until you find your mate and then—"*

*"And then the council leaders can do it with the pups and call it a pack ritual," I interrupted. "No thank you, I'd rather live with humans, have my freedom, and take my chances."*

*"Well, don't let Rudy hear you say that. He doesn't take well to deserters and traitors."*

*That was the first time I knew my fate had been sealed. The first inkling I had of why my parents had left the pack. They wanted a civilized life for themselves and free choice for me.*

I poured more wine and swirled it around in the glass as a log shifted in the fire, sending sparks up the chimney. I often thought of Sybil and wondered if she was still alive. Had she found her mate? Rudy would never have let her form that bond no matter how strong the pull. Being the Omega of the pack meant a life of servitude to the council, but I hoped she had found the strength to leave and make a better life for herself. She had been too scared to venture into the unknown when I had approached her about running away with me. Pack life was all she had ever wanted. To belong and feel comfort in their protection. She'd changed so much. No longer the innocent pup I knew, she had become a shell of the person she once was. But I liked to think they hadn't broken her completely.

Taking a large gulp of my wine, my mind replayed the night Sybil went from being my best friend to the Omega she was destined to be.

*On the next full moon, I discovered what the women of the pack had been preparing Sybil for.*

*As had become our custom, I gathered snacks, a blanket, and the book I'd been reading, and climbed the ladder to the barn's loft. Spreading out the blanket like we were going to have a picnic, I arranged the snacks and waited eagerly for Sybil to join me.*

*The moon was cresting over the hilltops when I realized Sybil wasn't coming. She had been isolated for the past week in what my grandma described as a cleansing ritual in preparation for her first shift into her wolf self. So of course she wouldn't meet me here. She would be inducted into the pack as a wolf tonight.*

*Leaning back against the splintered, weathered wood, I let out a deep sigh. Sybil was my only true friend in the pack, but that would change after tonight. She would be a she-wolf while I was yet to shift.*

*A commotion outside the barn had me peering through the broken boards of the loft. In the clearing was the ceremony circle, a marked-out area surrounded by granite rocks, and the pack was gathering in anticipation of the full moon. But tonight seemed different. Flaming torches were carried in a procession led by the pack Betas, Landon and Aiden, with elders including Grandma falling behind. The torches were placed around the circle, and an excited buzz filled the air.*

*I had no idea what was happening not being versed in pack customs, but I, too, found it difficult to stay seated as I peered through the aged wooden wall.*

*A hush filtered through the pack as three teens dressed in white shifts were led into the circle, two boys and Sybil. The boys held their heads high, with wide, proud smiles on their faces. Sybil*

*just looked overwhelmed by all the attention.*

*Rudy then stepped forward, and silence prevailed.*

*"As pups, you were all blood-linked to your parents as the family bond when young is the most important. That blood bond enabled you to mind-link with your parents and them to track you should you ever be in danger." Rudy's voice projected through the pack, and many nodded in agreement at his statement. I'd never been aware of a blood bond with my parents, maybe it was a pack thing, and my parents hadn't felt it necessary as we'd led more conventional human lives.*

*Rudy strode closer to the three who were to undertake the ceremony, addressing them directly.*

*"Tonight, you will call forth your wolf self for the first time, but before that happens, you will take a new blood-oath, a bond to your pack, and to me as your Alpha."*

*The two boys held their chests high while Sybil fidgeted. Her eyes darted around, and I wondered if she was searching for me in the crowd.*

*I should have been there to support her, and I would have been if I'd taken the time to learn the pack customs and rituals, but in the back of my mind, I thought my time here was only temporary. Sitting here, observing the ritual taking place on the ground below, I realized that when my time came, if I took the blood offering and pledged my allegiance to Rudy and the pack, I would never be able to leave. If he was allowed to mind-link to me, he would always be able to see through my eyes and speak to me no matter how far I ran.*

*Focusing back on Sybil, I willed her to look up at the barn to the little loft that had become our sanctuary. The second boy was reciting his oath while Rudy held out his wrist, the blood dripping from where his fangs had pierced the skin. The boy drank thirstily from Rudy's wrist, wiping the blood from his chin with the back of his hand.*

*It was then Sybil's turn. Stepping forward, she took a deep, calming breath before reciting the words, "I, Sybil Martin, pledge my life, body, and soul to my Alpha, Rudy Gilbert, and the Wolf Claw Pack of Clear Water Falls." With unsteady hands, she grasped Rudy's wrist and delicately drank from it.*

*I thought the ritual was over, but there was more to come. Rudy stepped behind the three and with control that came with experience and power, morphed his face and claws into their wolf form.*

*I'd never seen such a thing. I knew my parents had some control over how quickly they shifted, but I'd never seen anyone partially shift and hold that transition.*

*With razor-sharp fangs bared, Rudy went along the line, sticking his fangs into the shoulder of each new wolf. The two boys flinched but held firm, not allowing the pain to take anything away from how proud they were to be inducted. Sybil did her best to follow suit, but the tear that rolled down her cheek and the tremble of her bottom lip betrayed the brave stance she held.*

*As Rudy morphed back to fully human, Sybil tentatively touched her now bleeding shoulder, feeling the gashes from Rudy's fangs. She pulled her fingers away and examined the blood before wiping her hand on the shift dress.*

*Rudy stepped back and addressed the two boys. "You two will join the hunters tonight for your first hunt. I have high hopes for you both."*

*The boys grinned at each other, obviously pleased with Rudy's praise.*

*"Sybil." Rudy's bark had Sybil jumping to attention. "Your duty will be to serve the rest of the pack and elders."*

*Sybil nodded, knowing she would always be considered the Omega, the weakest and least important.*

*"You will serve in the great hall tomorrow night and eat last. But as a member of my pack, you will always have a home as long as you obey."*

*Congratulatory cheers rang out below, and I sat back on the picnic blanket. For all the buildup, what I'd witnessed in the ceremony circle was bordering on disappointing. In my heart, I knew it would never be enough for me. Even though I would eventually become pack healer and take Grandma's place if I stayed and therefore hold a position that garnered respect, the thought of staying with the pack forever brought nothing but feelings of dread. There was no life for me here. I would leave and forge my own life, just as my parents had.*

*With that thought in mind, I knew I needed to plan my escape, for I feared before long it would be me standing in the stone circle being forced to pledge my loyalty to the pack and share a blood-oath. By then, it would be too late.*

*I was just settling back with my book. It was a handwritten medical journal that had been passed down throughout the generations from healer to healer. Similar to a grimoire for witches I guess, this was written specifically for healing werewolves and contained a century's worth of knowledge. It was fascinating, and I'd spent many hours carefully turning the worn pages and memorizing plants and other healing properties we gathered from the earth.*

*The barn door creaked open. It had to be Sybil coming to see me, and I poked my head over the railing, ready to call out to her to get her skinny ass up here. I'd opened my mouth, a wide grin on my face, but my words were quickly swallowed, halted by the large lump in my throat.*

*Sybil was being led into the barn by six female pack elders, my grandma included. She was still dressed in the white shift dress that up close looked as though it had seen better days with obvious tears that had been mended over and over again. Sybil's wide gaze darted around the barn until her frightened eyes locked onto mine.*

*Once again I went to speak, to stand up for my friend who was clearly petrified by the second part of the ritual that was about to take place. But she shook her head at me and forced a tight-lipped smile.*

*I didn't understand. I'd seen many transformations in my life. Maybe they were bringing her in for her first transition as a safety measure. The time it would take her would be significantly longer than the older wolves as her body broke and mended in a new form for the first time. She would be vulnerable if left with the others.*

*The elders went about their tasks as I continued to peer through the cracks in the ancient boards of the loft. Sybil visibly shook as they dragged out heavy chains and proceeded to fix them to two posts that had been strategically dug into the foundation of the floor.*

*When the old women clamped cuffs around Sybil's wrists and ankles so her arms were pulled wide and high toward the ceiling, her legs held firm in a wide stance, she finally protested, attempting to pull her hands away from the restraints, her stance ready to run should she have the opportunity.*

*My grandma stepped forward and whispered something to Sybil I couldn't make out. When she shook her head violently, protesting to whatever it was Grandma had said, I watched as my loving grandma raised her hand and slapped Sybil so hard across the cheek that her head snapped to the side as the 'whack' rang out in the otherwise quiet barn.*

*With a deep breath for courage, I rose to my feet ready to climb down to free my friend.*

*"Don't." The word stopped me mid-stride as Sybil's firm instruction reached me. She knew what was about to happen and had accepted her fate. Now I had to do the same. As I sank back against the barn wall, Rudy and the other council men of the pack entered and examined Sybil's*

*restraints as if tiny, gentle Sybil could pose any threat to them.*

*The moon had not yet risen, but a pulse of anticipation thrummed through the air.*

*The women stepped back into the shadows as the men, unable to keep their excitement under control, paced around Sybil like she was a lamb to slaughter.*

*Finally, Rudy stepped forward, and the pack fell silent. Through their silence, I could hear the rest of the pack outside growling and snarling.*

*Something was about to happen, and I had a feeling I was not going to like it. Trying to keep to the shadows, I was well aware that I was not supposed to bear witness to the initiation that was about to take place. It was sacred.*

*Grandma had mentioned Rudy claiming Sybil and taking what was rightfully his, but my naive mind had pictured it happening in private. I mean, I didn't think there would be candles and soft music playing, but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine it happening in a barn, heavily chained to posts, while a dozen or more people watched.*

*This was not how your first time was supposed to play out. Not for Sybil and definitely not for me.*

*Peering through splintered, weathered boards, I fixed my gaze on Sybil's face, trying to send her my support through an invisible line. Despite seeing her throat move with every deep swallow, her chest heave with heavy breaths, she appeared calm. It was then I realized just how strong Sybil really was.*

*Sinking back against the rough wood, I watched the ritual play out before me. Had every female wolf really endured what Sybil was about to?*

*The moon was rising, but Rudy's experience came into practice as he controlled his transition. I watched in awe as his face changed fluidly from human to wolf and back again. His nose extended to a snout, his teeth elongating as his eyes shone a bright yellow. Stepping up behind Sybil, Rudy reached up, his hands displaying dark tufted hair and long claws as he took hold of the shift dress around the back of Sybil's neck and in one motion tore it open, the shredded garment falling to the dirt ground.*

*Sybil yelped, realizing she was now standing naked and chained in front of over a dozen pack members, half of which edged closer with every breath.*

*Rudy's half-human, half-wolf form rose high, extending to its full wolf height.*

*"Have you come here of your own free will?" he bellowed, and for a moment I couldn't help feeling how ludicrous that question was. As if Sybil had any choice in the matter. It was either submit or be cast out and hunted for sport by the pack on the next full moon.*

*"Yes." Sybil's voice was so strong, and I once again was surprised by her strength and acceptance of this barbaric ritual.*

*"Do you submit to your Alpha?"*

*"Y . . . yes." Sybil's voice wavered this time, and my heart went out to her.*

*Rudy ran his clawed hand down her side, grasping her hip firmly. "Do you acknowledge as a half-breed the service you will provide to the pack?"*

*There was a long pause, and I wondered if Sybil had been made fully aware of her position and what would be expected of her. Finally, with an audible gulp, she replied, "Yes."*

*The other men in the barn sneered at the thought and my blood boiled.*

*Outside, a drumbeat echoed, building to a thunderous rhythm. My heart beat in time, I could only imagine the pounding in Sybil's chest.*

*Rudy stepped forward and placed his other hand on Sybil's hip. I willed her to be okay, to let*

*her mind drift to someplace peaceful, somewhere happy. Then with one single thrust, Rudy was on her, inside her. Sybil's eyes opened wide in sheer shock before a pained scream left her lips.*

*Closing my eyes for a moment to shut out the scene below me, I opened them again to see blood soaking into the barn's dirt floor. There was blood on Sybil's shoulder where Rudy had bitten her, blood pouring down her thigh where his razor-sharp claws had slashed her. He was moving his hips back and forth, his eyes closed, but hers were wide open as his hand slashed across her abdomen.*

*I wanted to help her, I really did, but the shock was so profound that I was rooted to the spot.*

*Landon and Aiden stepped out of their clothes and then moved in behind Rudy as if forming a line.*

*Sybil's head fell forward, her chin on her chest and I hoped for her sake she had passed out from blood loss.*

*Sybil must have realized that Rudy may be the first tonight to stake his claim, but he wouldn't be the last.*

*Summoning all the courage she had left, her eyes darted to the loft where she knew I was hiding, and she mouthed, "Run."*

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

May had kept her word and was curled up on the couch, with a blazing fire warming the house. We devoured the pizza like we hadn't eaten in a week. "Maybe I should have bought two," I joked, trying to lighten the somber mood. May had withdrawn even more while I'd been picking up the pizza, peering into the flames as though she was a million miles away—or maybe she was back in Clear Water Falls, reliving whatever had happened to her that made her run.

I hadn't pressed May to move in so I could keep an eye on her, but the subtle comments that the house was too big for one person or that there were plenty of spare beds didn't go astray, or unnoticed.

"I know what you're doing, Connor," she said, rolling her eyes. "And I appreciate you wanting to protect me from the big bad. But as soon as my car's serviced tomorrow, I think it'll be time to drift to another town."

She was stubborn, strong-willed, and independent. All the things I looked for in a girl because girls who could look after themselves weren't clingy. They didn't need me in their lives, and that had always suited me just fine. This feeling of wanting to care for May was something new and a feeling that I'd only had once before. There was Gran who I had a deep desire to protect, and now May.

There was one other avenue I hadn't considered. Finding something wrong with the car would keep her in town a little longer until I could sort out Landon and Aiden. But if Logan was anything like Benny when it came to business, he wouldn't be happy with my work if I invented a problem that wasn't really there.

May stretched her arms above her head and let out a hearty yawn. "I'm going to head back to the hostel. I have a few things to sort out before I leave." She met my eyes. "I really am sorry, but it's best for everyone that I move on."

I couldn't disagree more. "Please don't go without saying goodbye."

She edged toward me and threw both arms around my neck. I inhaled deeply, her feminine scent mixed with the earthy woods and smoke from the fire washed over me. I squeezed tight. "I can't believe I finally found you after fourteen years, and I'm going to lose you again."

May climbed onto my lap, her weight even as she straddled me, our bodies pressed tightly together. "Maybe you don't have to lose me tonight." Lifting my head from her shoulder, I looked up to meet her eyes. "I've waited fourteen years to see you again, too."

Soft lips pressed to mine, pulling back just enough to make me lean into her, wanting more. My hand went to her hair, drawing her head toward me so I could devour those full lips. She whimpered, the subtle vibration against my mouth spurring me on to kiss more firmly. Her hands cupped my cheeks, and she ground her hips against me, the seam from my jeans straining against my growing

erection.

"Take me to bed," she murmured between our lips. With one arm around her waist, I lifted her and stood in a single motion, carrying her petite frame to the room I had claimed as my own.

I wanted to consume her, body and soul, but at the same time savor every inch of her. I'd dreamed of this moment, and if it was the one time in my life I would have with her, if she left tomorrow and I never saw her again, I wanted this to be perfect. The perfect new memory to replace all others that I could carry with me for the remainder of my life.

Laying her gently on the bed, I pressed soft kisses down her neck while my hand slid beneath the sweatshirt. Her skin was soft and warm but broke out in goosebumps as my fingertips grazed over her abdomen and found her bare breasts.

She sighed, her body arching from the mattress to meet my caress as her nipple pebbled beneath my touch.

Pulling back, I gazed down at her with a lump forming in my throat.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her cheeks flushed.

Shaking my head, I swallowed the lump so I could speak. "I can't believe you're really here . . . with me. I don't want to look away for a second in case this is all a dream."

"But what a wonderful dream, Connor." She cupped my cheeks and pulled my face to hers, her kiss igniting the fire in my belly I'd been trying to contain. "Don't hold back." Her eyelids fluttered, but she forced them open and fixed her gaze back to mine. "I want to look at you. It's been far too long since I've seen your face." Her hand slid down the front of my jeans as our mouths met again. I was already rock hard, and her soft hand worked me from base to tip as she hummed in my mouth. "I want to see all of you. Show me what I've been dreaming about all these years."

Sitting up, I made quick work of shedding my clothes before sliding my hands around the waistband of the sweats she was wearing and stripping them off her. May shucked her sweatshirt and stretched back out on top of the covers, her eyes scanning me from head to toe.

I needed a moment to take her all in. She was perfect, at least perfect to me. Everything I'd fantasized about hadn't done her justice. With long, lithe limbs and a taut abdomen, she was a contradiction in every sense of the word. Delicate and feminine yet strong and athletic. Soft but firm.

"Wow," I rasped, my eyes committing every part of her to memory.

"Wow, yourself." Her teeth sunk into her bottom lip, and she raised her hand, tracing her fingers down my six-pack and over my defined V muscle until she wrapped her hand around me and began working me in slow, firm strokes.

Kisses came hot and heavy. Any control I thought I had was gone as our tongues danced, our bodies pressed together as I held her against my aching cock, and felt it rub against her thigh.

She was beauty and grace, fluidly moving down my body, pressing light kisses as she went until those perfectly plump pink lips slid over me, the wetness making me impossibly hard.

"Ah, fuck . . ." I hissed and raised my head to watch her mouth sink further down my shaft. My fingers slipped into her hair, pulling it back from her face and fisting it in a bunch at her nape. I wanted to be gentle and tried not to buck my hips too deep, but when she hummed around my cock, sending vibrations to my balls, I couldn't hold back. "I don't want to hurt you," I managed between groans. With a sly wink, she let me know she was okay, and I finally relaxed and let my body respond the way it wanted to.

With one final lick, she raised her head and grinned, her pink lips now swollen and even more tempting than before. I couldn't get enough and leaned up to kiss her as she lay back down beside me before sliding my hand between her thighs to find her soaking wet and ready.

"See what you do to me," she said breathily, "I've never wanted anything as much as I want you."

I watched her, watching me, as I slowly, deliberately, brought two glistening fingers to my mouth. "So sweet," I said, my voice husky. Her lips parted, her chest heaved, but she held focus. Sinking down the bed, I positioned myself between her thighs and planted soft kisses first up one thigh and then the other before reaching the apex. Inhaling her heavenly scent, I let my mouth take over from my hand.

Immediately, she grabbed a firm hold of my hair, holding me in place as she took what she needed. I was more than happy to oblige, working her to a frenzy until her movements changed and I knew she was close.

"Oh, God, Connor . . . don't stop, don't . . ."

Her body went stiff, her thighs gripping my head so tight they blocked out all sound. But I kept going, working every last drop from her until all that was left were tiny aftershocks rippling through her as her body finally relaxed.

Raising my head, the rise and fall of her chest was rapid as she flung one arm over her face. "Holy fucking shit . . ." She let out a soft chuckle. I couldn't wipe the smug grin from my face.

Reaching for the nightstand, I quickly grabbed a condom and rolled it on. I needed to be inside her, to feel her warmth wrapped around me. Lifting my body above hers, I rested on my forearms and maneuvered myself until I felt my tip nudge her entrance. Her arms reached up and wrapped around my neck as her legs wrapped around my hips. Holding each other's gaze firmly, I sunk into her in one long, slow movement.

May's lips parted, and she expelled a puff of air as I filled her. I groaned at the contact, resting my head in the curve of her neck. "You feel so good, babe," I whispered, "so fucking good."

"Right back at ya," she said on a moan as I pulled almost all the way out and thrust back in.

I wrapped one arm under the curve of her back and slipped it down until her hips were raised higher, adjusting the angle and depth. I knew I was hitting the spot as her moans changed and her breathing picked up to become no more than little pants. It was torturous being immersed as deep as possible while trying desperately not to blow, but what a way to go.

May tilted her head back giving me access to her slender neck. Nibbling first on her earlobe, I nipped down her neck to her jaw until finding her lips once more. The grip of her legs tightened around my hips as she used the momentum to meet me thrust for thrust, first hard and fast, and then slow and deep. A sheen of sweat coated both our bodies. I didn't know how much longer I could last.

"Harder . . ." May panted, and I followed her request. A second later I felt her clench around my shaft as she came on a whimpered scream. That familiar tingle crept up my spine, my release imminent. My balls tightened and my vision blurred. May pulsed around me as I joined her, pushing each other over the edge.

Rolling off May so as not to squash her, I needed a minute or two to catch my breath. May cuddled in beside me, tugging the covers from underneath us to pull them over our sweaty bodies. Taking a second, I rolled to my side to tie and wrap the condom in a tissue.

"I like this," she said, running fingertips over my dragon tattoo as I tossed the tissue in the wastebasket beside the bed. "I've never met one myself, but then I hear they like to keep to themselves."

I looked back at her face. She was smiling knowingly, one brow cocked.

"You think dragons are real?"

She shrugged. "I think most things are real. You just have to know where to look."

Allowing my gaze to take her all in, her delicate features, milky white skin, perfectly round

breasts with dusty pink nipples, she was perfection. “Well, I believe in angels,” I cupped her cheek and kissed the tip of her button nose, “now that I’ve seen you.”

I jolted awake, but not because of a nightmare. Having May beside me seemed to still my mind and bring me a peace I hadn’t known since childhood. With eyes wide open, staring into the darkness, my ears strained to hear what had caused me to suddenly wake.

“Did you hear that?” May whispered, her body humming with tension.

“I heard something,” my reply just as quiet. “Did it wake you too?”

“I wasn’t asleep.” Turning toward May, I could just distinguish her outline to see she’d turned her head toward me. “I think it’s the brothers. I knew they’d come for me. I should never have stayed here.”

I edged toward her, my lips a hairsbreadth away from her ear. “How would they find you here? It’s probably just the wind, but I’ll go check.” Climbing out from beneath the covers, I quickly pulled on my jeans. If there was someone in the living room, there was no way I’d be caught naked. Then as an afterthought, I grabbed the crossbow and a single arrow from the closet.

May sat up, the covers pooling in her lap. “If it’s nothing, why are you arming yourself?” She slipped out of bed and proceeded to pull a baggy sweater over her head.

“Stay here,” I urged, barely loud enough for her to hear me.

“Not a chance.”

Floorboards creaked in the hall, not far from the closed bedroom door. I took a deep calming breath and moved around the bed toward the sound. I looked over at May, she nodded and held up the dagger I’d left on the nightstand, the half-moon catching the silver blade mounted in the bone handle. As quietly as possible I turned the knob, then painstakingly slowly pulled open the door to be met by pure darkness. The light switch for the hall was just outside the door. I flicked on the light, expecting to be greeted with an empty hall. Instead, a bearded, long-haired man filled the space.

“Where is she?” he growled.

I raised my bow, ignoring his question. “I’ll give you three seconds to get the fuck out of here.”

He pulled out a knife and flicked the long blade open, brandishing it from side to side with practiced ease. “Or what?” he scoffed, taking a step closer.

“Or I’ll shoot you where you stand.” From what May had said earlier this had to be Landon, which meant Aiden was somewhere in the house. The floor creaked behind me, and I realized he’d circled around to attack from behind.

“Back off, ass-wipe,” May ordered as she side-stepped through the doorway, so we stood back-to-back.

“I knew we’d find you here, May. We followed your trail back from the cave.” Aiden clicked his tongue in disappointment. “You should know better. You made our job easy.”

“Well, I’m not going to make it easy for you now,” May said from behind me. “You’ll have to get past this beautiful silver dagger.”

“And my arrow,” I added.

Landon hadn’t taken his eyes from the crossbow and arrow. He seemed to be studying it. Finally, he spoke. “You’ve aligned yourself with an interesting ally, May. It’ll be the death of you.”

“Or the death of you,” she said with such confidence it surprised me.

"Think of the choices you're making, May. This won't end well for either of you if you stay with this guy." Landon had taken another step nearer as he spoke. I held my ground. If he drew any closer, he'd be within kicking distance. "We don't want to hurt you, May." He sneered at me. "But I can't promise we won't have a little fun with your friend here."

My heart pounded in my chest as I lowered the bow, placing it on the ground beside me, my eyes never leaving Landon's face. "Give it your best shot."

Landon charged, but I was ready for him. I'd picked fights in bars with guys bigger than him, some of them armed. He wasn't expecting a power kick to the hand that easily disarmed him, the knife sliding across the polished floor, but when my next kick made contact with his jaw, and all he did was grunt and stumble, I knew this guy was going to be a challenge.

*Bring it on.*

He shook his head, clearing the fog, then grinned. Seemed he was looking forward to the fight as much as I was. His right fist swung. I ducked and punched as hard as I could straight into his stomach. It was like hitting a brick wall. This guy was pure muscle. But so was I.

He was big, which made him slow on his feet. His punches flew thick and fast, but my martial arts training gave me an advantage as I blocked and dodged. Kicks were more powerful than fists, and a roundhouse to the side of the head had him seeing stars.

Behind me, I heard May speak. "Stay back, Aiden, or I swear to God, I will gut you like a fish."

As long as she could keep the second guy at bay, I knew I had the upper hand with this lumbering giant. His fist, the size of a Christmas ham connected with my jaw, whipping my head back. The metallic taste of blood filled my mouth, but I pushed it aside. He'd taken a few steps back, and that was all I needed. I took one, two, three steps and jumped, a flying kick with both feet off the ground, and planted them firmly in Landon's chest. He hit the boards with a thud, making the house shudder. There was a commotion behind me, and I spun, my right fist landing squarely on Aiden's nose with a sickening snap. Blood spurted from his nose, and he clutched it with both hands.

They were both beat, but for how long I had no idea. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, blood streaking the skin.

"Get out," May demanded. "And tell Rudy I'm not coming back."

Landon was back on his feet, and I clenched both fists, every muscle tensed and ready for round two. He took a step away toward the door. "You're making a big mistake, May. This guy, he's not for you. Look at his weapons . . . think about it." He raised his chin to Aiden, indicating to the door but he wasn't done yet.

As he moved to go around us he took a swing, not at me, but at May, connecting with her cheek and knocking her back into the wall. "You've forgotten where you belong," he seethed, stepping toward her. That was it, I completely lost it as a rage I'd never felt before consumed me. He was on the ground, my fists pummeling into his face, the blood spraying up the walls and over my bare chest with every punch.

Someone was on me, pulling me up, but my fists kept flying. In that moment there was one singular thought in my mind—kill. Arms the size of tree trunks wrapped around my arms, pinning them down. I did the only thing I could, jerk my head back until it connected with Landon's nose.

"Mother fucker!" he growled from deep within his throat. "I'm gonna fucking kill you."

There was a click. Subtle in sound but there was no mistaking it. Everyone stopped, all eyes on May who had cocked the crossbow, nocked an arrow, and was ready to fire.

"No one's killing anyone tonight." Her eye was already starting to close from the punch that had connected, but she was so calm and matter-of-fact. I took the crossbow from her hands, the blood

coating my swollen knuckles making it difficult to hold.

Landon was in my sights. "You and your brother get the hell out, or one of you will be wearing this arrow . . . and I don't care if it's you"—I swung the bow to aim it at Aiden—"or your brother."

They backed away, and I followed them until they were on the verandah. "This isn't over," Aiden snarled before tugging Landon's arm and the two of them disappeared into the woods. The door hadn't been locked. It was a rookie mistake from a time when there was no danger at the lake house, and it was perfectly safe to leave it open. I wouldn't be making that mistake again.

With the deadbolt locked and all windows checked I went in search of May. She was in the kitchen finding ice, frozen peas, and any other makeshift ice pack available. She held the peas to her swollen cheek and handed me ice wrapped in a cloth for my jaw.

"I'm so sorry, Connor. I should never have put you in danger like that." Now that the adrenalin had waned, tears sprung to her eyes, rolling down her cheeks. I held her to my chest, she clutched on to me as her body trembled.

"It's over now. The main thing is you're safe." My lip was split, I could feel it. But it was my knuckles that were swelling and bleeding. "Why don't you take a seat while I find the first aid kit."

By the time I came back to the living room with gauze and antiseptic to clean the wounds, May had stoked the fire and was examining her face in the mirror above the mantle. "I can't go to work like this," she said, turning her head from side to side and tentatively touching her cheek.

"You definitely can't go back to the hostel." She looked at me for a moment before nodding in resignation. "So, you'll stay here?"

"Until my car's safe to drive. Then I'm gone."

Sighing, I changed the subject, instead focusing on all the cuts and bruises. I'd be leaving Portland in two weeks after the full moon, whether I caught the shifter or not. If I could convince May to stay a little longer, maybe she'd be willing to drift to Kansas with me.

Everything ached, from my jaw, to shoulders, to legs. We'd bandaged my hands the night before, but they were so stiff I couldn't do more than wiggle my straight fingers, there was no bending them. May had been restless, jumping at every sound, but in the safety of daylight, she slept soundly beside me. Her eye was swollen closed, cheek bruised. But she was still beautiful.

Slipping out of bed, I groaned involuntarily as I stood. May's car was booked in at Logan's garage, and I was supposed to provide the service and brake pad change. Neither would be happening.

Taking one final look over my shoulder at a slumbering May, I crept through the door to find my phone and call Logan. It was as good a reason as any to keep May in Portland a few days longer. She was worried about her brakes, but as long as the car was unsafe to drive, she wouldn't be going anywhere.

The soft sound of her bare feet against the floorboards approached. "I woke up, and you were gone." Warm arms wrapped around my waist from behind, and her hair brushed my bare skin as the weight of her head pressed against me.

"I've just called Logan to tell him you won't be bringing your car in today."

Her head jerked up. "Why won't I be taking my car?"

I held up my hands to show patches of dried blood where it had seeped through the dressings.

“Because I’m supposed to be servicing it. I’d have more luck holding the tools with my feet than my hands at the moment.”

Stepping around me, she leaned her butt against the counter. “I guess I can stay a few days longer.” I smiled, the pull on my lip reopening the split and making it sting. “But I want to be gone no later than the end of next week.”

“What’s the rush? I’ll be heading back to Kansas, to Gran’s house in a couple of weeks. You could come with me.”

Her eyes bugged open. “Ah, you want me to come to Gran’s house with you?” I shrugged as casually as my racing heart would allow. “I don’t play happy family, Connor. You know that.” She was retreating again. Running away.

“It’s just an option. An idea, that’s all,” I called as she raced out of the room.

*Damn!*

Fifteen minutes later, May was back, fully dressed with car keys in hand.

“So you’re going?” I needed to admit defeat. I’d held May in such high regard in my mind for so many years that there was no fear in moving this relationship forward at a rapid pace. For so many years I’d avoided being happy, afraid that if I allowed myself to feel content in my life, I was somehow doing my parents a disservice. That I would forget them and what they went through but seeing May again changed everything.

For me, meeting up again after so long had been a sign that this was the right time for *us*. And the right time for closure. I’d never wanted to settle down with anyone before. I’d been the one running whenever a girl had wanted more than a physical connection for a night. But it was because my heart had always been holding out for May. Knowing that no one could ever climb that pedestal and knock her off the throne I’d placed her on.

But my feelings weren’t reciprocated.

I scoffed. She tilted her head to one side, eyeing me. “What’s funny?”

“Usually, I’m the one running out the door the morning after. Making all kinds of excuses as to why I can’t stay. Now the shoe’s on the other foot.” I gave her a tight-lipped grin. “It’s okay, you do what you need to do.”

I was such a chump. My heart hurt at the thought of her walking out the door, and out of my life. But there was no way I was groveling. May was scared of Landon and Aiden, that much was plain to see. They might have gone back to the cave, grabbed their belongings, and left. Traveling back to Louisiana to tell Rudy that they’d failed their mission. But they may also be regrouping, ready for a second attack and if that were the case, they’d be ready for whatever I had to throw at them. They’d seemed surprised by the crossbow, but all it would take was for them to purchase a gun and lay in wait a few feet into the tree line of the woods.

But above the fear of the brothers was the same fear I saw in myself. She was afraid to let herself be happy.

May rounded the counter, taking my wrist to turn me toward her. “You asked me to move in here . . . for my safety.” I nodded. “Well then, I need to go get my things from the hostel.”

I couldn’t contain my relief, wrapping my arms around her in a tight embrace. “Let me come with you, just in case.” There was no need to elaborate. We both knew the threat of the brothers was still a possibility.

She shook her head. “It’s fine. They came out of last night worse off than us. They’ll be licking their wounds if they haven’t thought better of it and left altogether.” With a gentle kiss on the forehead, May was out the door. “I’ll call past the diner and let them know I’ll need a couple of days off too.”

She pointed to her swollen black eye. “They won’t want me scaring the customers away.”

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

# CONNOR

Against my better judgment, I stayed at the house while May went to settle her account at the hostel and collect her belongings. It was after lunchtime before she finally returned, and I was able to let out the breath I'd been holding.

She skipped up the front steps to the verandah carrying a backpack over one shoulder, a large duffle bag, and a paper carry bag from the diner. "I hope you're hungry. When I stopped at the diner, and Rosemary saw my face, she was speechless . . . which for Rosemary is saying something." She laughed as the bags were dumped by the front door, and the food bag was placed on the kitchen counter.

I hadn't eaten, my gut too busy churning while I waited for May to even contemplate food. The aroma of burgers and fries wafted from the bag, and I was suddenly famished.

"Anyway, I told her how two people had broken in last night, and you'd fought them off and protected me." She gave me a heartwarming smile. "And now you're her favorite person in the entire world. I'd make the most of it if I were you. You could eat your way through the diner menu for free."

I laughed, the split on my lip pulling tight and reminding me I'd taken a beating too the night before. "I'm glad you're back. I was worried." We carried the food to the sofa and settled in. "I thought I might go for a walk a bit later and check out the cave."

May had been just about to take a bite of her burger but stopped. "Are you insane?"

"I need to know if they're gone. Don't you want to know?"

"And what if they're there? Or what if they're *not* there when you go into the cave, but follow you in? You'd be trapped."

She had a point. But I wasn't afraid of a couple of guys, I'd faced much worse. "Then we fight it out. *Ding! Ding!* Round two." May shook her head vigorously. "Don't you think I can beat them again?"

The burger hovering so close to May's lips was placed back on the paper wrapper in her lap. "Hand to hand you can beat them, but now they know you can fight, I think they'll lift their game next time. If there is a next time."

I shrugged it off. May had no idea what I'd faced in the past. "I'll take weapons, it'll be fine."

"What weapons do you have other than the crossbow and dagger?" Her brow rose, and she flinched, cupping her cheek and puffy eye with one hand. The bruise was already fading, but her eye was still swollen shut.

"Show me your face." Leaning in, I held her chin between my thumb and forefinger. "Your face is already looking a bit better. The bruising isn't purple anymore, it's already yellow."

"I'm a fast healer. It's genetic." She smiled, then finally took a bite of the burger. "Oh, my god,

that tastes so good."

I wished my hands were healing as quickly as her face. They were still swollen and stiff making it difficult to hold the food. There would be no way I could go another round with the brothers, not for a few days at least.

"Okay, if it'll make you happy, I won't go anywhere near the cave again."

"Do you promise?" She asked.

"Yes, I promise." But I knew it was a lie. "But that doesn't mean I won't be sleeping with one eye open."

She grinned at me and indicated to her puffy eye. "Me too."

Being injured had its benefits. With the bruising on May's face, Rosemary had given her a few days off until she felt ready to return. Logan had given me time off when he saw that my swollen knuckles meant I could hardly make a fist. So May and I spent the next week indoors. We talked about everything from how tough it had been growing up without parents to our favorite movies. We'd explored each other's bodies in every room of the house. When we were finally sated and struggling to draw a breath, the thunderous hammering of my heartbeat in my ears, we'd talk, laugh, and drink my uncle's red wine until the need to be entwined would consume us once again.

I'd never known this kind of happiness before. Every minute spent together was a memory. Every laugh or mischievous look in May's eyes had me wishing I could freeze time, to live in that moment forever. This was how it felt to truly connect with someone. To put their needs above your own. For years I'd been roaming the country on a mission, avenging my parents. Now my mission was to make May happy. To make her feel safe so she could let her guard down and stop running.

It was only three nights to the full moon and although I wanted to catch this shifter, the fight in my gut that drove me onward for fourteen years had subsided. After three days of torrential rain and storms, we awoke to clear skies and a frosty bite in the air.

I wanted to go back to the cave. It had been on my mind, and although I was sure the brothers must have moved on because they hadn't reared their ugly heads since the night they'd broken into the house, it would put my concerns to rest to see for myself that their sleeping bags and backpacks were gone. May was due at work for the lunch shift. Reluctantly, she hugged me goodbye, the kiss lingering on my lips long enough to turn my mind back to the bedroom.

"Be good," she said with a laugh. "Don't miss me too much."

"I'll try not to," I joked back, but the truth was I knew I'd miss her the second she closed the front door behind her.

As soon as her car rattled up the long driveway, I pulled on my boots, shrugged on a coat, and pulled a beanie down low around my ears. May had been adamant she didn't want to return to the cave so I'd dropped the subject, not wanting to say or do anything to push her away after she'd finally started to feel more at ease and settled. But that didn't mean I wouldn't go the first opportunity I had. My lock box was still under the bed with most of the weapons locked safely inside, but the crossbow and silver pointed arrows were in the closet, and I'd strategically placed a few daggers around the house in different rooms in the event that the brothers did come back. Two daggers slid down the sides of my boots, and another hooked into my belt. I fetched the night-vision goggles to use once inside the cave. With the crossbow secured over my shoulder and arrows in a quiver, I was ready for

whatever may come at me in the woods.

The track we'd initially taken had been washed away, a slippery, muddy sludge in its place, so I decided to take the trail that wound around next to the water until I found the clearing again. The heavy rain had eroded some of the riverbank away, and at one point, I needed to go further inland as the trail had completely gone, leaving only a tree hanging on precariously by its exposed roots. It was slippery, and several times my footing slipped, but I held on to whatever branches or shrubs I could grasp, making sure not to drop the crossbow into the raging waters.

Finally, dense woods opened up to the clearing. Sheltered by the sheer rockface from the icy wind, the clearing itself was a few degrees warmer. It was calm and still, a beautiful location to camp during the summer months. I could see why May was so taken with it when we first stumbled upon it. Unsure if the brothers were still in the vicinity, I decided to keep to the tree line as I crept toward the cave.

The cave opening was twenty feet in front of me when I heard voices in the distance behind me. With the sheer rock wall to my left, the clearing to my right, and heavy boots drawing nearer, the only way was up. With as much stealth as I could manage while laden down with weapons, I made a beeline for a jagged outcrop above the entrance to the cave and crouched down behind a boulder. My heart raced, but I drew long calming breaths, all senses on high alert. The brothers emerged from the dense woods into the clearing. Landon, covered in mud and soaked in blood, carried a huge buck across his shoulders while Aiden was armed with a machete still dripping with the buck's blood.

Why were they still here? They hadn't made another move on the lake house, which had led me to let my guard down and focus on May and our future, instead of her safety. Aiden's face was completely healed after our altercation. Maybe they were waiting for reinforcements before they tried a second attack. Whatever the reason, we needed to leave Portland because from the wild look in Landon's eyes as he gutted the buck on a flat rock that served as an altar, the next time we met the brothers, May and I might not be so lucky.

I stayed huddled behind the boulder, watching their movements. They were predatory, sniffing the air and standing stock still listening to sounds in the woods that my straining ears couldn't make out. The brothers were born hunters who could easily survive in the woods for months at a time foraging from the land.

"It's a full moon night after tomorrow," Aiden said as he came out of the cave to where Landon was skinning the buck. "You know what that means?"

Landon leered. "Yes, brother. Revenge."

May had picked up a few extra shifts at the diner now that she was able to work, and I told her I'd be in for dinner. The sight of Landon's animalistic, wild eyes was still forefront of my mind, but that one word played on repeat as I parked the Chevy and entered the diner.

*Revenge.*

"Booth for one?" May asked as soon as I stepped foot inside, planting a kiss on my cheek.

A table of guys sitting down to a massive plate of chicken wings saw the exchange. "Hey, we didn't get a kiss hello when we arrived," one joked.

"Come on, babe, where's ours?" They all laughed as the guy puckered up, making smoochy noises in May's direction.

She laughed it off, but when one of the smart-mouths tried to grab her ass as she showed me to my booth, I wasn't laughing.

"Hey, buddy. Keep your hands to yourself," I barked, shoving his hand away from May.

"You keep your hands to yourself," he sneered, standing to face off against me.

"Boys!" Rosemary called, bustling her way over from behind the counter. "Robbie Donovan, do I need to pull you back down into your seat by your ear, the way I used to when you were a kid?" Rosemary stood, hands on hips, eyebrow cocked. "You leave May and Connor alone, ya hear me?"

The other guys at the table were nearly bursting, trying to hold their laughter in. Robbie wasn't impressed but reluctantly did as he was told and sat back down.

Rosemary turned to me. "May told us what you did. Anything you want, it's on the house."

"Thanks, but you don't have to." She stepped forward, throwing her arms around me in a bear hug. It only lasted a few seconds, but when she stepped back, I swear there were tears in her eyes.

If the service had been VIP before, it was ridiculous now. Every time my glass was half empty, it was filled. May, Therese, and Rosemary buzzed around. If I happened to look up, one of them would be beside the table in seconds to see if I needed anything. It was funny, but it was also drawing attention to myself and starting to make me feel uncomfortable.

Roland hadn't been seen since that first night he'd made his presence known at the diner, and I'd hoped he'd moved on, but as I sat back in my favorite booth and undressed May with my eyes, remembering all the depraved ways we'd merged as one the night before, a familiar stench assaulted my senses.

"Well, you really know how to kill a good mood, don't you?"

Roland slid in opposite me without invitation. "Now, Red, you and I both know, I ain't going anywhere."

"But why here? What do you want?"

He picked up the menu and flicked the pages. "I hear they serve excellent pie. A man's gotta eat, don't he?"

He wasn't here for food, and it made me anxious that he was sniffing around May again. I needed to keep them as far away from each other as possible. As soon as that thought ran through my head, May came over.

"Hi, can I get you something?" she asked in her usual sweet voice, but her glance darted back and forth between us.

Roland's eyes ran over every inch of May before turning back to the menu.

"Actually, he was just leaving." I turned pointedly to Roland. "Weren't you?"

He leaned back into the booth, staying put, a smirk on his narrow face. "What's the hurry, Red?" He nodded toward May. "I'd like to meet your friend here."

"My name's . . ."

"Maisie," I interrupted. "This is Maisie, an old friend of mine." It was awkward calling her a friend, but we hadn't had 'the talk' yet.

Her brow furrowed but she played along. "Pleased to meet you Mr. . . ."

"Roland." He stood the menu back up at the end of the table. "So, you've known Red here for a while?"

May nodded, a flush spreading across her cheeks. "Yes, since we were kids."

"Hmm, I see." He turned his attention to me. I could see in his eyes that he was weighing up the possibility of May being the one we were both hunting. "And you know each other well?" He questioned. From the twist of his mouth to the squint of his eyes, suspicion was etched all over his

face.

"Yes, Roland, we're close. Real close." If only I could tell him she wasn't the one he was hunting, but to voice it out loud would sound strange to anyone else but us.

He leered at May, reading a sexual intent to my comment. "I'll have coffee. Strong, black, and hot."

May left the table to get the coffee pot, her odd-colored eyes meeting mine as she took a second look over her shoulder.

I took my chance.

Leaning into Roland, I lowered my voice to barely a whisper. "I found a couple of guys in the woods the other day." His brow peaked. "Hunting deer with nothing but a machete. Wild looking and living in a cave next to a clearing about an hour's hike from my uncle and aunt's lake house." He pulled a toothpick from his shirt pocket and glided it into the corner of his mouth. "You remember the house?"

"I do."

"Just follow the flow of the water. You can't miss it."

"What about you?" he queried. "Why are you telling me?"

"Because I want to get Maisie out of here before the full moon. The house is too close to these guys. She's in danger if we stay."

He sat back into the padded vinyl of the booth. "I hear ya, Red. Leave it with me."

Roland was sliding out of the booth as May returned with the coffee pot. "Sorry I can't stay, but it was a pleasure meeting you, Maisie."

He stood. "And always a pleasure seeing you again, Red."

There was never any pleasure in seeing him. It always led to trouble, but at least this time, I'd managed to shift his focus to two guys that I knew were dangerous, werewolves or not. As he pulled open the glass entry door, the wind whipped around him, blowing his jacket back so his belt was exposed.

May gasped. Her hand flew to her mouth as she took a step back, stumbling. "Mother fucker," she raged under her breath.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Her eyes flamed with a hatred I'd never seen before. "Were they . . . teeth on his belt?"

# CHAPTER TWENTY

# CONNOR

One night before the next full moon, and I felt like my entire life had been leading to this moment. I had no idea who the shifter was that I'd been chasing all over the country for nearly a year, and a realization dawned on me—I no longer cared. At this point in time, as I sat across from May enjoying a candlelit dinner that I'd fumbled my way through but somehow managed to pull together, all I wanted was to live and focus on the future, and not dwell in the dark and death any longer.

May had been excited as she'd entered the dining room after coming home from a dinner shift and showering. With warm, comfortable clothes on and still damp hair, she'd squealed and clapped her hands with glee before throwing her arms around my neck to draw me near.

"I can't believe you've gone to so much trouble. This is the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me."

I pulled out her chair and poured the wine. I wanted everything to be perfect. "I hope you're hungry."

"Did you cook?"

"I did." I'd spent all afternoon working through a lasagna recipe, using every pot, pan, and utensil. It didn't quite look the same as the photo on the website I'd found that claimed to contain easy recipes, but for a first attempt, I was pleased with the outcome. "I hope it's okay."

"It looks"—she inhaled deeply—"and smells delicious." She looked at me from under her lashes. "So, what's the special occasion? It's not my birthday."

I cleared my throat while wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans. "I wanted to talk to you about something." She nodded for me to continue. This was harder than I thought it'd be. "More wine?"

"You wanted to talk to me about wine?" she teased.

"No, but I need another glass." I topped up both our glasses and drank half of mine down. "We've both been roaming from one city to another for years now, drifting where the wind blows us. I know you've had your reasons, you've been running from Rudy and the commune." She nodded again. "Do you think you'll ever stop running? Just settle down somewhere and make it your home?"

Leaning back into the high-backed chair, she rested her fork on the plate. "I don't think I know how, Connor. It's the way I live my life. No ties, nothing to keep me in one place."

"But if you had something to keep you in one place. If you had a home . . ."

She frowned. "But I don't have a home. I haven't since my parents were killed. I'm a mess, Connor, made up of broken pieces."

"We all are, May. But maybe your pieces will fit with mine."

She shook her head, her eyes downcast.

This wasn't going the way I'd imagined it the one-hundred times I'd played it over in my mind.

“What if you did have somewhere to go?” I sighed in frustration. “You could come to Kansas with me. Don’t you want to settle down one day and have a family?” Her eyes bugged. I held up my hand to stop the thought I could see written all over her face. “I’m not saying right now, don’t worry. Just one day in the future.” She shook her head, but I’d come too far to give up. “I could fix your car tomorrow, and we could be on the road by nightfall.”

“That’s too soon. I . . . I can’t just drop everything.”

But we could drop everything and leave this place. I no longer cared about the moon cycle, but in the back of my mind, I knew Landon and Aiden were waiting for the full moon to make their next move.

“Don’t you want to stop drifting and find a place to land?” I pleaded, paraphrasing her tattoo. “Settle down. Have the whole white picket fence dream.” I rounded the table, taking the seat beside her so I could hold her hands in mine. “You could stop running and allow yourself to be happy?”

I’d only spent one night with Benny, Rachael, and little BJ, but it was all I needed to reaffirm that I was tired of the constant one-night stands and crappy motels. I wanted what they had. I wanted someone I could rely on, someone I knew would always be there through good times and bad. I’d always thought that person would be May.

“I can’t think like that.” My heart sank. “My life, the life my parents led, it’s not something I’d wish on anyone.” *What did her parents have to do with it?* “I’ve never thought about raising kids”—she scoffed—“God forbid they turn out like me. And chances are they would.”

*She was scared because she had no idea how truly amazing she was.* “If they turned out like you, they’d be the luckiest kids alive.”

“No, Connor. They really wouldn’t.” With that, she was on her feet. She snatched her thick coat from the hook by the door and bolted into the night.

I buried my face in my hands. I’d screwed up by coming on too strong. The truth was I didn’t care if we never had a family. Hell, we could travel around for the rest of our lives if that was what May wanted. I just wanted to be with her. I wanted to wake with her beside me every morning, to go to bed every night with the warmth of her soft breath against my cheek. I’d camp out in a tent, sleep in my car, or spend nights in a cave huddled around a campfire if it meant we could be together.

I loved her. I always had.

I should have followed her, run out behind her, and stopped the girl I’ve loved since I was twelve from fleeing into the night.

She hadn’t come back like I’d hoped she would, and as the night turned to morning, all my increasingly desperate voice messages had gone unanswered.

The diner was my only hope. If she wasn’t there working the breakfast shift, then I was at a loss where to find her. Snatching up my keys, I had one foot out the door when my cell rang. It was May.

“Oh, thank God. I’ve been so worried. Where are you?”

There was a long pause. Was she reconsidering her decision to return one of the half dozen messages I’d left? Finally, she answered. “I’m fine, Connor. I just needed some space. You kinda freaked me out a little bit.”

Slumping back against the kitchen counter, I swiped my hand across my brow. “I know, May. It’s just, I’ve always thought that one day we’d cross paths and realize that it was always meant to be you

and me . . . together."

"You know I care about you, Connor. I always have."

"But . . ."

"But I need some time. There's a lot to consider."

"Like what? Tell me, and we can work through it together."

She sighed like the weight of the world was on her shoulders. "I've always been on my own. It's just how it's meant to be. That way no one gets hurt."

"I'm a big boy, May . . ."

"I know," she said huskily, trying to deflect the conversation.

"Thanks for the ego boost, but you know what I mean. I can handle myself. I'm not worried about being hurt, it'd hurt more to lose you again."

Silence once more. A long gut-churning silence.

"Just give me a couple of days to think things over. Okay?"

"Okay, whatever you need." I glanced around the living room. May had left in such a hurry, she barely had anything but the clothes on her back. "Do you need me to drop some of your things off to you? Where are you staying?"

"I don't need anything. I've decided to go where I do my best thinking. I'm going back to nature."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# CONNOR

The sun set early, and with every second it sank behind the mountains, my heart rate increased. May had gone back to nature which could only mean one thing – she was camping. Camping in the wild, on a full moon. Pacing the length of the veranda from left to right and back again, I cursed under my breath, the rain drumming on the corrugated tin roof drowning out my harsh words.

I knew she wanted her space, to think through my suggestion of moving to Kansas with me to settle down and make it our home. But she had no idea of the danger she was in. She'd be defenseless and alone if the werewolf was still in the area. No matter how independent May was, she would never be able to fight off a beast with razor-sharp fangs and claws that could shred her to pieces with one swipe. But even if the werewolf had moved on, I knew Landon and Aiden hadn't. They were hiding out in the cave until the full moon when they would exact their revenge. Only May didn't know that. She didn't know they were still there licking their wounds and biding their time because I'd promised her I wouldn't go looking for them so I couldn't tell her what I knew.

That was it. No matter if it cost me a future with May, I couldn't leave her alone out there. Charging purposefully through the house so my boots drummed heavily on the hardwood floors, I dragged the weapons chest from under the bed. Every dagger and short knife I owned were slid down the sides of my boots, into pockets, or onto the utility belt so there was always one close at hand. Knowing how thick the heart of the woods was and the structure of the rock face, the night-vision goggles would come in useful, so they were also clipped onto the utility belt. The crossbow was still in the closet with a dozen silver-tipped arrows. The only thing left to find was my worn and faded red hoodie. Over the years it had become my good-luck hoodie. The one I wore for all my kills, and this would be the most crucial of all because it wasn't only my life that was potentially in danger, but also May's.

Barreling through the front door, I took one last moment to gaze upward at the glow of the full moon as it began its ascent over the horizon, shimmering through the cloud that shrouded any stars that may be shining. I knew where May would be camping. She was so taken by the clearing surrounded on each side by rock face, lake, and woods. The muddy ground bore no tracks that I could see, all footprints having been washed away by the heavy rain that had fallen mercilessly all day but was thankfully beginning to ease. The cloud cover dissipated, allowing the moon to light my path and I moved in silence through the heavy underbrush as raindrops sprinkled down from the tall branches.

Clumsy, heavy footsteps thudded toward me, accompanied by a deep-pitched curse as he stumbled through the heavy brush. I hunkered down in the hollow trunk of a Douglas-fir tree, dagger at the ready. It obviously wasn't a werewolf, but it could be one of the brothers, and where there was one, there was always the other. Every fiber of my being was on high alert as footfalls passed behind

me and continued to slop through the mud. Torchlight flashed from side to side as more men trampled past, shotguns at the ready.

It was Roland and his crew. He hadn't left as I'd hoped. Instead, his band of drunken, clueless hunters had joined him. Fear for May's safety increased, rising to my chest and squeezing tight. Not only were there the brothers who had vowed to seek revenge at the full moon, but now the woods were teeming with trigger-happy hunters. Her parents had been killed in these very woods by hunters who had mistaken them for wild animals and shot before clearly sighting and identifying their prey. To have May shot by one of these drunken morons when I was so close to the clearing was more than I could bear to think about.

As soon as they passed, their torches lighting the way to the lake, I crawled from the tree trunk and raced for the clearing. Branches whipped at my torso and face stinging against my freezing skin, but my pace never slowed. The rock face closed in on the left as the woods began to thin toward the clearing before my punishing pace slowed. The full moon shone down upon the deserted ground as I scoured the open space. May was nowhere in sight, and I had no idea where she was. Her comment of going back to nature which I had thought was obvious, clearly didn't mean she had planned to pitch a tent in this clearing. Maybe the heavy rain had changed her mind. The woods around this area were vast, and although there were no other clearings as perfect as this that I was aware of, I knew May and her parents had spent many holidays and weekends camping.

The sound of gunfire rang out in the still night air, followed by so many rounds it sounded like fireworks on the fourth of July. I froze, my gut dropped, and I prayed that they were firing on an animal, maybe a deer, and not a defenseless girl who was caught by surprise collecting water from the river. Running through the brush along the tree line, I stopped on the edge of the woods hidden behind another Fir, and strained to see the men milling around waving their shotguns in the air. The hunters having let loose on whatever they had found, would be high on adrenalin and likely to fire on anything, including me should I step out from behind my cover.

Movement from the corner of my eye captured my attention. Something dark and large, very large, skulked in the shadows along the rocky ridge between rocks and boulders . . . could it be? Quickly grabbing the night-vision goggles from my belt, I pulled them on. My vision cleared to an eerie green, and a huge black werewolf taking cover between the rocks and rubble halfway up the cliff face. Nocking an arrow, the silver head catching the moonlight, I sucked in deliberate steadying breaths, took aim . . . but hesitated instead of releasing my bolt. It wasn't attacking. Why wasn't it pouncing on the hunters? They were clearly out of their depth and most likely firing shells that would do no more harm than a mosquito's bite to a human.

With my finger on the trigger, I froze as realization dawned on me. This was the werewolf I'd been hunting for nearly a year. Finally, I'd caught up with the shifter, and it was within my sights, literally, so why wasn't I taking my shot and putting this chase to an end? Why? Because as I stood on the edge of the woods, watching the hunters stampede through the clearing as they hooted and hollered, the werewolf hid and I swear I could see it trembling as fear emanated from its every pore. It was no vicious killer, at least it was no threat to humans, and as I watched the men swing their torches from ground to sky searching for it, for the first time in my life I said a silent prayer that the creature would escape.

Taking a few steps back into the shadows, I lowered the crossbow but left the arrow nocked. Every instinct told me that I was a hunter and I should end this right here, right now. The werewolf was defenseless, scared, and alone, and I knew exactly where it was. All this could be over. I just had to raise my bow, aim, and fire.

I turned, ignoring the voice screaming in my head to shoot, and quietly made my way back to the house.

My body trembled, not from the chill that ran through my bones but from pure adrenalin still coursing through my system. Pacing like a caged animal, I struggled to form a coherent thought. It was right there, mere feet away and I hadn't acted, instead choosing to let it live. I ran my hands through my wet hair, fisting the long stands into peaks. This one wasn't a killer I kept telling myself. But weren't they all killers?

My phone vibrated against the wood of the coffee table, the sound resonating through my head and into my foggy brain. I'd slept on the couch, the roaring fire thawing my frozen body. But my sleep had been restless and broken. Images of the wolf from the night before taunting me that I'd come so close and not finished the task. In my dream I was that frightened twelve-year-old boy, cowering in the car behind my mom's seat, trembling under Dad's red hoodie.

Grabbing at the phone before the call went to voicemail, I attempted to clear my throat before speaking. "Hello," I croaked.

"Hey, Connor, did I catch you at a bad time?" Logan chirped.

"No, of course not." I swung my legs over the edge of the couch and sat up. "What's up?"

"Well, that Pontiac GTO has just arrived, being driven by a very cute little lady I might add. Are your hands healed enough to come in and work on it?"

Leaning back into the cushions, I let my head drop back, and eyes close. May was safe. After all my running around in the woods, worried that she would be attacked by the shifter or shot by some trigger-happy hunter, she was unharmed. But she was also getting her car ready to leave, and that thought made my heart heavy. "Yeah, I'll see you in an hour."

Logan was in his glass-fronted office when I arrived, a frown painted across his brow, eyes glued to a little television that sat atop a filing cabinet. I gave him a wave as I passed by to gather the tools I'd need, and he called me in.

"Did you see this?" he asked, his eyes never leaving the vision on the screen. I walked around the desk until I, too, could see the news bulletin. Five bodies in coroner's body-bags lined up on the bank of a river as, one by one, they were loaded onto a police boat. I recognized the location before Logan turned to address me. "That's near your place, isn't it? I'm sure it's not far from you."

I nodded, the lump in my throat prevented me from answering.

"They said it was some sort of wild animal. I reckon probably a mountain lion. There are caves in the side of the mountain, and apparently, those dumbasses went exploring in the caves, probably looking for somewhere dry to get wasted, and got more than they bargained for."

"That must be what it was." My throat felt like sandpaper, and I swallowed several times to lubricate my vocal cords. I couldn't tear my gaze away from the news report. The police were milling around, most of them armed with rifles, but because they thought a wild animal had killed those men, there was no police tape or investigation. I'd seen it so many times before. Animals, whether it be mountain lions or bears in the woods, or coyotes on the outskirts of a little town, were always on the move, so it was considered a case of wrong place at the wrong time whenever people were attacked. They would move the bodies, do a sweep of the caves, and close the case. Maybe a concerned citizen would put up flyers around town warning people to beware, but nothing more would come of it. I,

however, would never forgive myself for letting that bloodthirsty creature live. All of those men were alive when I'd left the clearing, and now, because I'd taken pity on the werewolf as it shielded itself behind the jagged rocks, I had cost five men their lives. Had I truly read the situation so wrong? After so many years of tracking and hunting these creatures, I thought I knew everything there was to know about their actions. The werewolf last night had seemed so terrified that I dismissed it as being as dangerous as a Labrador puppy. But it wasn't harmless. It wasn't scared. It had been cunning and laid in wait above the cave entrance until the men had gone inside, then it had entered behind them and ripped them to shreds.

I couldn't tear my gaze away from the extended news bulletin. There had been witnesses, but the other hunters seemed confused about what type of animal had attacked their friends. Maybe it was a bear, maybe a large mountain lion, the truth too much for the remaining intoxicated men to comprehend. The only one who stepped up and spoke with confidence was Roland.

"We have with us an ex-deputy from the Portland Police Department," the reporter announced by way of introduction. "Ex-deputy Roland, can you shed any light on this tragically gruesome turn of events?"

While still clutching his shotgun, Roland swiped his hand down his drawn face before speaking. "I did manage to get a good look at what attacked us last night." His gaze was so cold as it bore down the camera lens that I took a step back. "It was a large wolf, probably passing through, using the cave for shelter. It moved fast"—his head shook and focus dropped to the ground as if remembering —"seemed to be everywhere at once."

"Did you get a clean shot at this wolf?" the reporter asked with a furrowed brow.

"No, we weren't prepared for how quickly it moved." Roland's eyes drilled down the camera lens once more. "But I'll be ready tonight." He looked like a man on the edge of insanity as he sneered. "Big bad's going down tonight, mark my words. Nothin' and no one's getting in my way."

The reporter looked rattled, and I can't say I blamed him. "Well, ah, thank you, ex-deputy Roland. Folks, if you're in the area tonight. Stay safe." He forced a cheesy smile. "Now, back to Charlotte with the weather."

Luckily, I knew my way around an engine and worked on autopilot because I couldn't concentrate for the rest of the day. So many thoughts, and so many emotions ran through me it was hard to keep up. All things happen for a reason, it's something my mom believed, and that belief was passed down to me. So May not staying at the house had turned into a blessing in disguise. As much as I wanted to spend time with her, I was tired of the lies, and I didn't want to make excuses when I left at dusk, heavily armed, and trekked back into the woods.

The churn in my gut increased to such a pace I felt nauseous as one thing became crystal clear.

Tonight, I would end this one way or another.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

What the fuck? He's a hunter!

That had been the thought on a constant loop since locking eyes with Connor last night at the cave and was still echoing through my mind hours later as I lay tucked in my sleeping bag, zipped securely in the tent.

To say seeing Connor in hunter mode with a crossbow aimed straight at me had surprised me is an understatement. No, not surprised . . . terrified. It terrified me for so many reasons.

We'd actually locked eyes, and for a few terrifying heartbeats, I'd thought he was going to shoot me with his arrow. But he hadn't. Our eyes had met and held and something I will never understand caused him to lower his bow. Could he sense I was no threat to any human, especially him? To harm Connor would be hurting myself. My heart had been lost to him since our summer together. Maybe that's why I had never had a meaningful relationship, my heart was no longer my own to give.

But although it was a suspicion I'd pushed deep down because I didn't want to face the possibility, I now had proof. I couldn't ignore the fact he's one of the few people I was raised to fear because their very existence revolved around hunting and killing my kind. Dread cramped my stomach and tears burned my eyes.

Did he know about me? Does he know what I am?

This entire meeting that I thought was fate bringing us together after so long could be a well-devised plan on his part. I'd felt the presence of a hunter on my tail for some time now, it's one of the reasons I'd kept moving. The thought that Connor could be the one hunting me sent a shiver down my spine. But there's something else overriding that terror—an overwhelming deep-seated sorrow like a rock in the pit of my gut.

How could we be together?

I'd fooled myself into believing that maybe Connor would be understanding of this curse, after all, it wasn't something I asked for or had any control over. I was born this way and have hated it and all it entails from the moment I was sat down by my parents and told. But he'd never accept it, not now I know his mission in life is to kill my species. If he didn't already know about me then as soon as he found out, I'd be wearing one of his silver-tipped arrows through my heart.

In the back of my mind, or maybe deep down in my heart, I'd hoped that maybe the pull I felt toward Connor was the mate bond I'd heard about for as long as I could remember. His scent was intoxicating and even as children playing in the woods, I'd always known his whereabouts like an invisible tether had connected us no matter how far apart we were. For a wolf to be mated with a human was rare, but it did happen, and after all these years of holding him safely in my heart, I believed that could be the reason. But a mate bond with a hunter? It wasn't possible. We were sworn

enemies. The mere thought of us both loving and loathing each other was ludicrous.

My heart had shattered last night as I'd waited for him to turn and leave before sneaking through the rocky ridge and fleeing back to the campsite where I'd set up my tent before the moon rose.

I'd wanted to camp in the clearing we'd stumbled across during our hike, but instinct had told me to set up elsewhere on the off chance that Landon and Aiden were still in the area. I'm glad I listened to those instincts because although Connor had lowered his weapon, there were a dozen other hunters I didn't want to face. If they'd come at me, I may have had no choice but to defend myself, and to take a human life, even in self-defense, would be something I could never recover from.

Roland was there too. I'd seen him directing his posse like a traffic cop at a busy intersection. He seemed to be their leader, or at least he believed himself to be. The image of his belt had flashed through my mind as I'd hunkered down behind the boulder and for the first time in my life, I considered setting my true beast free and taking revenge for every shifter he had killed and collected a trophy from. But I couldn't do it. Even the life of a vile man like Roland was a life I wasn't prepared to take.

In the end, it seemed only fitting that I'd decided to pitch my tent at the campsite where my parents had been shot. It was somewhere I had wanted to camp for so many years but was unable to bring myself to do. This was the site my parents had stayed and where they had been killed all those years ago. At the time, the police had thought deer hunters had shot them, having mistaken them for game, but I knew better. It was hunters, but not deer hunters, it was werewolf hunters. The ammunition had surprised the CSU investigators but not me, it had only confirmed what I already knew. After all, how many hunters used silver bullets?

The extraction of my parents' canine teeth had been another mystery but was quickly swept under the carpet, or maybe filed in the too-hard basket. The deputy who had been one of the first on the scene, Deputy Roland, had been quick to dismiss the souvenirs the hunter had taken and made up some bullshit excuse. I'd argued with anyone who would listen as hard as an eleven-year-old could. But my noise was also ignored.

Sitting up so quickly my head spun, I metaphorically slapped myself for not putting two and two together sooner. It all finally made sense. It had come full circle. The deputy who worked my parents' case was Deputy Roland, and he had dismissed my questions about their missing teeth being ripped from their gums. Of course he had, he was the one who had killed them. It had to be him.

Rage coursed through my veins as once again the image of his belt came to mind. His souvenirs were a macabre reminder of how my parents must have spent their last moments on earth. Bleeding and in pain, while a madman took delight in taking something of theirs that he had no right to.

Although I'd lost them both that night, rendering me an orphan, it gave me some peace to know they were together in the end. Their mate bond had been strong from the moment they'd met as young pups. One wouldn't have been able to survive without the other.

Crawling from the tent, I got busy lighting a fire to boil a pot of water for a much-needed cup of coffee. Whether I left with Connor or not, I needed to hand in my notice at the diner and move on . . . again. It was more important than ever now I knew Roland was not only a werewolf hunter, but a barbaric madman who didn't shoot to kill but enjoyed inflicting pain. Nursing my coffee mug, using the heat to warn my cold hands, I wondered if Connor and Roland were working together. They knew each other, but the look of contempt on Connor's face at the diner when Roland had made himself comfortable in the booth reassured me they weren't friends.

Packing my belongings into the tent, I zipped it securely and trekked through the woods to the main road where I could catch a bus into town. My car was still at Logan's for service and brakes so

leaving Portland today was out of the question, but I could prepare for my departure, tying up loose ends and saying my goodbyes.

The diner was busy when I entered, and the chatter was louder than normal.

"Oh, thank the heavens you're all night," Rosemary said, bustling over to me with outstretched arms.

"Ah . . . yes . . . I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?" Dread crept into my gut as her arms wrapped around me in a death grip.

Allowing her a moment to rub my back, I wondered if somehow she had discovered my secret. But, no, she couldn't have, could she?

"I swear, May, you must live under a rock. "She huffed. "It's the talk all over town." My brow creased, still none the wiser. "The killings. Near Connor's lake house . . ."

I must have looked like a fish out of water with my mouth opening and closing. "What . . . what killings?" I managed to gasp out.

Rosemary indicated to the group of scruffy men occupying three tables that had been pushed together.

"Those men were in the woods last night near Connor's. Said some sort of animal came out of nowhere. Killed five of them apparently."

I needed to sit down, so gingerly lowered myself to a barstool at the counter. Connor had been there last night with his crossbow.

"Is Connor . . ." I couldn't bring myself to say the words. Animal out of nowhere, it had to be Landon and Aiden lying in wait in their werewolf forms. They had already threatened Connor. Had they gone after him?

"He's fine, May. He was already in here this morning looking for you before work. He mentioned needing to get your car ready for you." Rosemary smiled knowingly." I got the impression the two of you would be leaving soon. Together, I hope."

She didn't miss a thing. Although my heart wanted to leave with Connor, my mind told me to run in the opposite direction, but Rosemary didn't need to know of my conflict.

"Yes," I forced a smile," that's why I called in today on my day off."

"I knew it!" Rosemary exclaimed, her red cheeks pushed up in a broad grin. "Don't worry about us, May. We always knew you weren't staying forever, but you know you're always welcome here, anytime! Throwing my arms around Rosemary, I cast a glance at the table of men, still talking animatedly.

Roland was there. The urge to hurt him the way he'd hurt my parents had my fists balling and teeth grinding. My parents were no angels, I was well aware of some of the traps they had laid to catch unsuspecting humans, but he was a monster.

The sun was beginning to set when I decided to hike to the clearing. I'd hoped most of the town people and hunters would have moved on after the tragedy of the night before, but unfortunately, it seemed that death was more interesting than any other town gossip, and the place was teeming with men with rifles, vying to be the hero who could capture the wild animal.

I knew Landon and Aiden would stay away. Even though they were fast and strong, they were no match for the number of people ready to shoot.

I hadn't been able to eat anything of significance last night, and although I could eat in human form, the hunger that took over while shifted could never be sated by a previously consumed burger and fries. I needed to hunt, but also keep my wits about me. The clearing and area around Connor's were off-limits, so I'd travel deeper into untouched territory where the underbrush was thick. There would be rabbits and small critters to catch, but I needed something more substantial. I needed to fuel my body and build my strength for what was to come.

As I carried out the ritual of stripping my clothes and folding them neatly in a pile, I made a promise to myself that this life of fear I lived would end. From experience, I knew the crowd at the clearing would spend the night there and realize that the bobcat that had attacked so viciously had moved on, and as was always the case, interest would move on to the next piece of town news.

But I knew better. Landon and Aiden would still be in the area because they were on official pack business. They were here for me and wouldn't leave until they either took me by force, or I ran and they followed. I was tired of always looking over my shoulder, and I couldn't risk them killing anyone else, especially now I knew Connor was a hunter and would be out again during the full moon. I needed to lay a trap for them.

It was a huge risk, taking on two fully grown wolves. But the risk that gripped my heart more was telling Connor what I was. Letting him know that I was a werewolf. The same type of beast who had killed his parents when he was just a boy. The daughter of the beasts I believe slaughtered his family and left him an orphan. I didn't think he'd kill me, not in human form at least. But would he still want me?

Deciding to deal with the brothers first, I would draw them out and then let the chips fall where they may.

I'd bide my time tonight, and then tomorrow, I'd go back to the clearing.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# CONNOR

I never drank before hunting. Keeping a clear head and sharp reflexes was paramount to a successful kill, but as the sun went down and I went through the ritual of checking my weapons and arming myself to the hilt, my nerves were fried.

This hunt felt different.

It felt final.

Maybe it was because I was so close to ending the yearlong chase I could taste it. Or maybe it was because after tonight I had decided to hang up my crossbow for good and head back to Kansas. Holding out my hands in front of me, I gauged the tremble. "Well, this is a first," I muttered. "Pull it together, you have a job to do."

Aside from my uncle's extensive wine collection, he had also accumulated quite an impressive assortment of scotch over the years that he'd kept for special occasions, and for me, what could be more special than ending an era of torment and bloodshed? Going against all my rules, I grabbed a glass from the cupboard above the stove and poured a healthy slug of Chivas Regal blue-label scotch. Heat slid down my throat, and I had to fight the urge to reach for another. "After the fight is won," I told myself.

My phone had been charging on the kitchen bench while I'd been readying myself in the bedroom. I couldn't wipe the smile from my face when I glanced over to see one missed call from May.

*Hi Connor, it's me. I saw the news report today at work. Please stay indoors tonight. Stay safe. I'll see you in a couple of days once I've tied up a few loose ends. I hope my car's ready for that drive to Kansas.* There was a few seconds pause, and I thought the message had ended before her parting words sent a bolt to my heart. *I . . . I love you, Connor.*

I listened to that message three more times, carefully scrutinizing every word in case I'd misheard or misinterpreted its meaning. She was coming to Kansas . . . with me, because she loved me.

The clearing and the rocky ledge to the left was the last place the shifter had been seen, so that was where I headed. Thankfully, the cloud had cleared, and a huge full moon shone like a beacon in a star-filled sky. I'd stayed away from the clearing the night before as boatloads of weekend hunters had made their way up the river search for the next head to mount on their wall.

The police had finally come, their blue lights flashing, and moved everyone on and taped off the area so the only way there was through the woods. Finding my way through the woods had become

second nature, like walking through a familiar room in the dark, but I still had to keep my wits about me. The werewolf could be stalking its next meal, and I didn't want to come face to face with it, not without having my weapons ready to strike.

Images of the coroner's body-bags lined up sprang to mind, and my skin prickled. This wolf had taken down five grown men. They may not have been armed with the right ammunition—silver bullets—but Roland definitely was, and it had been too quick for an experienced hunter to shoot. Pausing, I pulled the long blade dagger from my boot, feeling the perfectly balanced weight of the intricately carved silver handle. The blade caught the light of the moon as I spun the dagger in my hand before holding it firmly at eye level. Should I need to strike quickly, I'd be ready.

The hunters had been killed in one of the caves, so I edged my way out of the dense woods as close to the rock wall as possible. Crouching behind a large boulder, I surveyed the area. There was a structure in the clearing that hadn't been there before, protected from the weather by the rockface. A triangular mass, its fabric edges flapping gently in the breeze.

My abdomen clenched as realization hit me like a ton of bricks.

"May . . ." Without thought for my own safety, I raced across the clearing to the little one-person tent but stopped dead when ice-cold dread crept down my spine. Clawed prints, as large as my size eleven boots, had circled the tent's entrance before shredding the sides until they were nothing more than flimsy strips of material. Crawling through what remained of the entrance, I rummaged through what little belongings were inside, needing to find something, anything, to tell me this wasn't May's tent. That after she'd warned me to stay indoors because it was dangerous in the woods, she hadn't been crazy enough to come camping in the heart of where five men had been killed.

But I didn't need to go through the backpack to know whose it was. The keychain that hung from the zipper, its fall leaves cascading down the side of the bag was all the evidence I needed. May's rosy cheeks and a smattering of freckles across her crinkled nose as she laughed flashed through my mind. I would never see that smile again, never hear her laugh. Tears streaked my whiskered cheeks as I slumped, burying my face in my hands. She was gone. There was no way in this world May could have survived such a vicious attack from a beast that was clearly bigger than me. I hadn't felt this sense of loss since the night my parents died fourteen years ago. And yet—I sat, back straight as I tried to clear my grieving mind—there was no blood. If May had been attacked in the tent, the interior would be painted red, but while nearly every surface was ripped into shreds, there wasn't a speck of blood.

Inhaling, I pushed aside the desire to mourn the loss of the girl I loved. Instead, I let the pungent, musky scent of werewolf fuel my desire for vengeance like never before.

Crawling from the remains of the tent, I stood silently and let my instincts take over. There were tracks all around the tent, animal and human, a jumbled mess of indentations in the mud. I crouched to examine them more closely. Drag marks leading to the river were prominent and continued as what looked like a struggle in the dirt eased off. Donning the night-vision goggles, I let the eerie green hue bring the darkened woods into clearer view. At the edge of the water, where the tall Fir trees met the clearing, was a solid shape, moving and writhing. Clawed limbs reached to the sky before a sickening howl erupted. Squinting, I swear I could see May's silhouetted profile before another tangle of limbs and the profile of the werewolf.

She was there . . . and so was the creature.

With lightning speed, I slid the crossbow from my shoulder, cocked it, and nocked an arrow. I was too far away to fire, but I wanted to be ready. As silently as my bulky frame would allow, I crept to the edge of the trees, using their limbs as shelter, and made my way to the water's edge. The distance

between me and my prey closed with every measured step until I was mere feet away. It was hunched over, the nauseating crack of bones had bile rising in my throat. I couldn't see what it was doing, with its broad back to me it blocked my view of its meal . . . my May, and I was thankful for that.

With senses on high alert, I raised the bow and took aim. It must have sensed me behind it because it turned, its face distorted, the long snout and prominent teeth still transitioning from human to beast as once again it changed, the snout shortening for the briefest of moments to that button nose I'd kissed so many times over the past month.

It couldn't be.

We locked eyes. The human eyes I'd come to love, one pale blue, the other a mix of blue and chocolate brown, changed one final time to the glowing yellow of a ferocious animal. She howled. A gut-wrenching, sorrowful sound that tore at my heart and stopped it beating for a moment in my chest. How could it be May? My sweet, gentle May. Surely my eyes were playing tricks on me. Squeezing them shut, I shook the fog from my brain. It had to be grief. Grief from finding May's tent in shreds and her body here with this killer. But as I opened my eyes to stare into the face of the werewolf, I knew it was true. May had been the cowering creature I'd seen the night before. But she'd also been the animal who had killed five men.

Raising my bow once more, I took aim and waited for her to make her move. She snarled, her lips curling back to expose long pointed fangs, but she didn't advance, instead, she stepped back, her gaze never leaving mine. "Come on," I yelled, "I'm here. You've been playing me all along, so do it. What are you waiting for?"

"The question should be, what are you waiting for, Red? You haven't gone soft on me, have you?" Roland's hollow tone was unmistakable as he crept from the shelter of thick underbrush, his rifle poised and ready to shoot.

May turned in Roland's direction and growled, a deep, gravelly vibration that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. She rose to an intimidating height on solid muscular legs, dwarfing me as I gazed up in disbelief. I'd never taken the time to study just what an impressively built beast the werewolf was, but with her full focus fixed on Roland, I took it all in. She hadn't attacked and looking at her, I knew she could pounce and rip both of us to shreds with her clawed hands in seconds. It once again made me feel that she was different from the other werewolves I'd crossed paths with. I lowered my crossbow and glanced in Roland's direction before reaching out a hand to him. "Lower your weapon. She won't hurt you."

Roland steadied himself and raised his rifle higher. "Are you crazy, boy? This wolf killed five men, but out of respect I was going to let you make the kill"—he side-eyed me for a split second —"seeing as it's your girl. So either shoot or get outta my way. But don't even think about trying to stop me."

May lifted her head to the sky, picking up the scent of something nearby. Raising to her full height again her snarl was vicious and full of power as she bared her gnashing fangs. She lunged toward me, and I just managed to tuck and roll as the mass of her dark-haired body sprang past. Roland fired wildly, the sound echoing in the night as the bullet grazed past me. Instinct took over, and I pulled a dagger from my boot as I swung around . . . in time to see two wolves reared and clawing at each other. I knew which one was May, even though in her werewolf form she was taller than me when standing on her muscular hind legs, she was dwarfed by the wolf she was now taking on. Claws and fangs tore into flesh as over and over they attacked each other, rolling and growling before pulling away to size each other up once more.

The click of Roland's rifle drew my focus as he raised his gun and readied to shoot. "No," I

screamed, “you’ll hit May.”

“Boy, I don’t care who I hit. I’ll kill ‘em both.” I couldn’t risk it. No matter what May was, she wasn’t a killer. She had protected me from the werewolf who had crept up behind me while I’d been completely focused on her. Stepping in front of Roland, I held my hands up in surrender, blocking his shot. “I told you once before, Red, get in my way and I’ll shoot you dead. Now move.”

“No.” He wouldn’t shoot me. He couldn’t . . .

I heard the shot ring in my ears before I felt the blinding pain rip through my right shoulder. My body slumped in the wet dirt and my focus blurred, but I fought to stay in the present. Roland had taken his shot, and his sights were now fixed on the mass of tangled fur and limbs once more. I couldn’t let him shoot May, but as the murderous growls and fighting continued behind me, I debated in my mind who was the bigger threat to my safety.

May was pinned beneath the much larger wolf as it snapped at her throat, her clawed hands struggling to hold it at bay. In that moment, I knew what I needed to do, I had to help May. My crossbow had dropped as I’d been shot, but the dagger was within reach. Staggering through the pain, I threw myself onto the dominant werewolf. It turned, its muscular torso rippling beneath me as its focus shifted. May slashed at its chest as I blindly drove my dagger into its flesh. There was no chance of aiming for the heart as we constantly struggled in an attempt to gain the upper hand so I made contact wherever I could. My shoulder seared in pain as consciousness threatened to leave me as I, too, became part of the twisted mass of bodies fighting for existence.

“Shoot!” I screamed. “Shoot now!” Not caring if the bullet hit me, as long as it hit the huge wolf that was slowly but surely overpowering me.

I glanced up to see what was taking Roland so long, but he was fighting his own battle. While I’d been holding my ground, unbelievably a third shifter had come out of nowhere and taken down Roland. The scene was surreal, and I froze, watching Roland stab over and over into the side of his attacker until finally finding its heart.

The creature I was tangled with howled at the sight then sprung back onto its hind legs and in one powerful leap, was on Roland, its huge jaws ripping his throat out. I was spent. My lungs burned, and the agonizing pain in my shoulder was like nothing I’d ever felt before. With my body wrecked, slumped in the churned-up mud, I felt consciousness drift. “No,” I muttered under my breath. May stood over me, the yellow of her eyes marred by the same heterochromia as in her human form, and a deep growl vibrated through her entire body. “Do what you want”—my eyes closed—“I’m yours.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# CONNOR

I had no idea what time it was when I finally woke. Speckled sunlight shone through the canopy of trees overhead and dusted the ground. A sleeping May was curled beside me, her arm draped across my body, seeming peaceful despite the bruises and abrasions scattered over her. If not for the fact we were outdoors, I could be forgiven for thinking the previous night's events had all been a bad dream. But as I tried to sit up and my shoulder screamed in protest, I knew it was no dream. Coagulated blood glued my hoodie to my arm and chest, and I flinched in agony as I peeled it from my torso to cover May's naked body.

A few feet from where I had lost consciousness, Roland's body, with his throat torn out and head at an unnatural angle, lay beside a naked, dead Aiden. That would be hard to explain to the authorities, and I wondered if we should move them or report the incident.

"Leave them," May said from beside me. "Landon will come back for Aiden. He'll be returned to the pack for burial."

Landon was still out there, and I quickly glanced around searching for him, but he was nowhere in sight. He must have fled sometime after I passed out. It had been him who May had saved me from risking her own life in the process and I had fought with the night before. No wonder they had arrogantly waited until the full moon to strike again, believing that in their wolf form they'd be no match for an unsuspecting human. But the carnage around me proved otherwise. Aiden had been no match for an experienced hunter.

Glancing at May, her exposed legs covered in dried blood and mud, I realized my assessment of the loan wolf had been correct. May had been scared of the hunters in the clearing and hiding, in fear for her life. It had been Landon and Aiden who had killed the five men. The reason the wolf seemed to be everywhere was because there had been two of them.

May uncurled her body and shrugged into my hoodie before zipping it closed. Quietly standing, she made her way to Roland and removed his belt from his lifeless body. I watched in silence, the agony in my shoulder felt like daggers stabbing every time I moved, but it was the pain in my chest, in my heart that made it difficult to catch my breath.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

May's sigh carried the weight of so many secrets and loss. Without turning, she replied, "What would you have done if I'd told you? You're a hunter, Connor. It's your sole purpose in life to kill wolves like me."

"Did you always know I was a hunter? Was this a trap that you and the brothers set up?"

She spun, her eyes blazing at me. "What? I saved you from Landon. He would have ripped your throat out without a second thought. How could you possibly think I would ever want to harm you?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe because it's what werewolves do." But as the words left my mouth, I knew it wasn't what they all did. It wasn't the way May lived her life.

"I have never hurt a human . . . ever. It's not who I am. We can control the bloodlust, you know. It's a conscious decision every shifter makes to either surrender to the beast or hold onto that skerrick of humanity that is always with us." Her chest rose and fell rapidly as she pled her case. She was no killer.

Finally, I nodded in understanding. "You were the wolf I saw hiding behind the boulder the other night. And the one the hunter shot in Colorado in the woods." She nodded. "You could have killed them, but you didn't."

Coming over to crouch beside me, she shook her head. "I choose to hold onto my humanity." Lowering her eyes, she held out Roland's macabre belt. "My parents were found with teeth missing." Her finger ran over the yellowing fangs, slotted through string loops in the belt. "It must have been Roland who killed them after he realized werewolves were in the area"—tears filled her eyes, and she audibly swallowed—"after they killed your parents."

My gasp cut through the silence of the woods. With eyes filled with fear, May bit her bottom lip before a sob escaped, slicing my heart in two. "I'm so sorry. Connor . . ." She clutched the belt to her chest, rocking back and forth inconsolably. "They killed your family, but . . . but they were my parents, and despite everything they did, I loved them." She took racking breaths, trying to control her sobs. "I still loved them."

After all these years, I had the answer to the one question that hung heavily on my mind. The shifters who had so mercilessly killed my parents hadn't gone on to hunt others over the years. They had been shot by Roland the following night.

"Our fates have been entwined more than we realized," I muttered under my breath. "I always wondered if any of the wolves I'd killed were the ones from that night. Now I have my answer." I tried to stand, but pain shot through my shoulder at the slightest move.

"Oh my god. You were shot." May dropped the belt to the ground and crawled closer, only stopping when within arm's reach. "Can I touch you?" Her gaze darted to the dagger still by my side.

"May, I would never hurt you." She didn't look convinced. "Even in shifter form, I couldn't shoot you. You're my"—I struggled to find the words—"my everything."

Within seconds May was by my side, pulling up my tee glued with blood to my shoulder to examine the gunshot wound. She gasped, and I knew it must look gruesome. We would have to go to the hospital. There was no exit wound, which meant we'd need to concoct a story about how I'd been shot last night.

"How bad is it? You can tell me." I waited for a response, and when silence was my only reply, I turned to see May's hand shaking as it covered her mouth. "Don't worry, we'll figure it out."

Her head shook vigorously. "No, no, no. I'm so sorry."

"What is it?"

"Connor," her tear-drenched eyes found mine, "you've been bitten."

I don't remember making our way back to the lake house, lighting a fire, or sitting on the couch. I'd been bitten by a werewolf and, therefore, was transitioning to become a freaking werewolf too. It was the only thought racing through my mind. On the next full moon, I would turn into the one creature

in the world I had spent the last eight years hunting and killing.

May fussed over me, cutting the tee off my body and gently peeling it back from my shoulder before cleaning the wound. My temperature had spiked, and I felt close to passing out. Maybe that was for the best, at least unconscious I wouldn't be fixated on what was about to happen to me and how my life would forever be changed.

"I need to go to my campsite and get my things." I nodded and with a groan, stretched out on the couch. Looking up, I saw May was dressed in a pair of my sweats and had changed out of the red hoodie. My good luck hoodie that now bore the tears from Landon's fangs. "I'll be back as soon as I can with something for the pain."

I couldn't reply. I was too focused on the fire burning through my body and the erratic sound of blood pumping in my ears.

"Connor. Connor, wake up." An angelic voice called to me, and my mind drifted to a summer long gone where life was simple, and the only worry I had in the world was sticking a perfect backflip. "Connor, you need to sit up for me. I have something for the pain."

I don't know how long I'd been out, but May was back and was holding a cup filled with a foul-smelling liquid in it. "Oh, God, what is that? Pushing her hands and the cup away, I turned my head and tried not to gag from the stench."

"I know it smells bad," she paused, "it's a shifter tea we use for pain. It's made from the roots of several plants."

"How do you know how to make it?" I asked, avoiding the tea.

She took my hand and placed the cup purposefully in it. "I come from a long line of healers. My grandma was teaching me at the commune, well, it wasn't really a commune, it was her pack."

"Her pack," I mumbled. "You lived with a pack?"

She nodded. "Yes, but I had to get out. The guy, Rudy, that I mentioned to you was the Alpha." She shook her head. "We can discuss all this later. For now, you need to drink while I make a paste for your wound."

To keep my mind off May digging into my wound to retrieve the bullet, I drilled her with questions about pack life, their rituals, and hierarchy. To be able to sit down with a shifter and talk one-on-one was something I was sure many people would have paid good money for. The insight into the inner workings challenged so much I had read. After much poking and prodding with long tweezers, most of which I didn't feel because of the tea, the bullet was out and a green, slimy paste made from moss and a few other ingredients I'd never heard of was smeared across the wound.

"Now, drink this." May handed me a sweet-smelling tea. "It will help you sleep and reduce the fever from Landon's bite."

I was grateful to have such a talented healer versed in shifter medicine with me, the contradiction not lost on me. The green paste was already working its magic to heal the bite and close my skin, and as I lay in bed and watched the sun set, there was one question I still needed to ask May but was afraid of the answer.

Would my first transformation be as painful as I believed it to be?

After two days of bed rest, the wound was completely closed, and my fever had broken. I still wanted to go back to Kansas but was fearful of hurting Gran now that I was no longer human. Could I be

around people on the full moon and control the beast? May had said it was a choice whether or not to let it consume you, that piece of humanity that remained acting as your conscience.

But one thing I did know, I couldn't leave May.

When I first realized she was a shifter it had broken my heart. The chance of us being together was an impossibility as we were sworn enemies, fated to be the other's demise. Now, everything had changed, and the thought of being without her was a pain too much to bear. She consumed my every thought, my only desire to be with her until the end of time. Was this what love felt like or was it something more?

The sun was making a valiant effort to break through the clouds so I took the opportunity to walk down to the river, perch on a rock, and absorb nature. I was still to change on a full moon, yet I felt my senses heightening with each passing day. Spending a few moments pitching stones into the raging waters, I knew May had left the house and was approaching long before she reached me.

"I knew you were coming," I told her. "Is that the wolf in me already making itself at home?"

"Maybe." She smiled, taking a seat beside me. "How did you know?"

"Your scent. You smell . . ."

"Oh, geez, thanks very much." She punched my arm.

"Let me finish." I laughed, wrapping my arm over her shoulders and drawing her against me. "You smell like everything I love in this world, all rolled into one." I shook my head. "I don't know, it's hard to explain, but you didn't smell like that before." I glanced over at her to see a wide grin spread across her face. "What is it?"

"That's how you smell to me too. I think it's the mate bond." She fidgeted her hands in her lap. "I'd grown up hearing about this bond with your mate. It's something that many had tried to explain but I don't think I truly understood until I saw you for the first time after all those years. I was drawn to you. I felt your nerves as if they were my own, and your scent, of my god, you smell like heaven to me." She shrugged and her cheeks flamed red. "Can you sense where I am even when I'm not here with you?"

Twisting my body to face her, I thought about earlier when she'd gone into town to pick up a few groceries. I'd known she was on her way back and could feel anxiety making my heart race that I somehow knew wasn't my own. "You were anxious today on your way back from town. I felt it."

May laughed. "Boy, it's going to be impossible to hide anything from you from now on." She sighed. "Yes, I drove past where your parents had been killed, and the guilt of my parents killing yours hit me like a wave. After everything that's happened, I was worried you wouldn't want me to go to Kansas with you anymore."

"Do you still want to come? I mean," I shook my head, trying to collect my thoughts, "I don't want to hurt Gran, but she needs me. We need to make this work somehow because you're my home, May. You're my place to land. I've drifted all these years, and it has brought me to you."

She squeezed my hand and rested her head on my shoulder. "We'll work it out. I'm here for you, I always have been. It's funny that this is where we met, and it's taken us fourteen years to find each other again, right back where it all started."

"You were my first kiss." I tilted her chin to press my lips to hers. "My first and only love."

"And you were mine."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# CONNOR

"Okay, Gran. You know what to do. Keep all the doors and windows locked and just in case, keep the crossbow nocked and with you at all times."

"All right, Connor." She placed the crossbow on the floral couch before going into the kitchen and pulling out the ingredients for turkey stuffing.

"Gran." I picked up the bow and carried it to the kitchen, placing it on the counter.

Gran shook her head and pushed it aside. "It's Christmas in a few days, and I have a lot of preparation to do. I can't be worried about the full moon."

"But, Gran . . ."

"No buts, Connor. As if I could ever shoot you. You're my boy."

I pulled her into a tight hug. "You know we're not the only ones out there. May's pack is still looking for her and Landon has it in for the both of us." I held her at arm's length. "If you see a werewolf, you have to shoot."

She nodded and side-eyed the crossbow.

It was the first full moon since I'd been bitten, and we weren't taking any chances. For extra safety precautions, May and I were going deep into the woods for my first transition, and May promised to stay with me at all times. With the mind-link we now shared, having sealed our mate bond, she assured me she'd be able to communicate with me during the transition and while we were in wolf form.

Gran surprisingly took it all in her stride when I'd broken down and confessed that I was now the thing I hated most in the world. She had taken my hand in hers, and in her matter-of-fact way, pointed out that it was also the thing I loved most in this world—May.

There is good and bad in all of us and in every species. It's up to you to decide which side of the coin you will be on, she had said. I was determined to live as May did and swore never to hurt a human. As much as I wished I could go back in time and avoid that night, and more specifically Landon's bite, I was glad I knew about May and that all the pieces of the puzzle had finally been slotted into place for both of us.

If there was anyone in this world I would want by my side, it was May.

My first instinct on a full moon was to pack my weapons, night-vision goggles, and supplies. May just looked at me and shook her head. "You won't need any of those things, babe. Trust me, all we need are our wits about us." She smiled and took my hand in hers. "I've got you. I promise I won't let anything bad happen or let you do anything that you'll regret in the morning."

So, with a final check of the windows and a peck on Gran's forehead, May and I left through the cottage's back door and made our way into the woods.

Once we reached the river which was the border of Gran's property, we found a large fallen tree and stripped out of our clothes, neatly folding and tucking them away for later. I was anxious, my nerves making me pace back and forth while May calmly sat on a branch of the felled tree watching me.

"Do you feel cold?" she asked.

I stopped pacing. I hadn't felt cold the past few weeks even though it was winter and snow was forecast. "No," I said, shaking my head. "I haven't been cold in a while."

May smiled. "That's the wolf. Your blood will be changing from human to werewolf. We're hot-blooded and can survive in the wild in the depths of winter." She indicated between us. "Even naked."

"Ha, okay." Every day I was learning things I didn't know about the species. After tonight, I would know what it was like to actually be one. The more I thought about it, the more excited I became.

A low hum thrummed through my body as I stood on the dirt, feeding up from my toes to my head, making my hair stand on end. It was strange, like I was absorbing nature itself into my being from the ground.

I looked at May and she smiled. "It's nearly time," she said, coming to stand beside me. Pointing up at the clear sky, I followed her gaze. The moon seemed bigger and brighter than I'd ever seen before. Somehow it was calling to me. "Let it in. Let it happen." May knelt beside me, her focus never leaving the glowing orb. I followed suit, all senses heightened.

With a deep breath, I suddenly heard May's voice in my mind although she hadn't uttered a word. We were mind-linked, another gift the shifters had that I had no idea about until becoming one myself. "Testing, testing, May to Connor."

I glanced over at May, brow cocked. "Really? Aren't you supposed to say, over, at the end?"

She chuckled. "I'm sorry. You just looked so tense I was trying to lighten the mood. But you did hear me, so we know it's working okay." She paused before adding, "Only a blood bond with the Alpha or mate bond can work like this." She reached over and held my hand. "You're the only one I've ever mind-linked with. And the only one I ever will."

I didn't think I could love her anymore, and yet every day something was said or done to fill my heart to overflowing.

With the hum in my body ramping up, I squeezed May's hand. We'd talked about this moment on the way to Kansas, and I knew I had to relax and not fight it, but it was hard. When I was a hunter I'd heard shifters go through the transformation, their bones cracking and crunching into form and it had sounded so painful. May assured me it wasn't as bad as it sounded, but I wasn't so sure. Would she really have told me if it was the most agonizing thing she'd ever experienced?

It took around five minutes for May to become her wolf, her experience allowing her body to change into a now familiar form. I looked over at her yellow eyes peering back at me, one eye carrying the dark patch that looked like an enlarged pupil.

"I'm scared," I admitted aloud, the fear in my voice evident.

"I know, babe. The first time is always scary, but you're safe here," she spoke without words leaving her lips. "Let's mind-link, okay? That way I can feel your pain and fears even more and take some away from you."

I didn't want her to feel my pain. I never wanted her to feel any pain.

"I don't mind, Connor. In my werewolf form, I can endure more than any human. It won't hurt me as much as it hurts you because I've already shifted."

I nodded and let my fears go.

I don't know how long it took to completely change. Every muscle tore, every bone broke and mended. I know it was excruciating, but as soon as my vision cleared to an astounding clarity and my ears picked up the slightest chirp of a cricket miles away, all memory of the agony endured only moments ago faded.

"Let's hunt." May's voice traveled to my mind, and if it's possible for a wolf to laugh, then I'm sure she heard my chuckle in her mind.

The sky was a blend of dawn color as I opened my eyes. In no hurry to get up off the soft ground, I pulled May into my side and wrapped both arms around her. She moved her body, pulling herself even closer as her hand lifted to rest on my chest.

"You did well last night, babe," she croaked, her voice hoarse with the day's first words. "I'm so proud of you."

I had to admit, I was proud of me, too. I'd watched and listened to everything May had said. The scent of the Bruer's cattle on the farm next door to Gran's was hard to resist, but May pulled me back, instead teaching me to separate the various scents in the air until I homed in on a buck a few miles downriver. I was quick and agile, and man, I was big. May had stood taller than me as a wolf when I was in human form, but last night I had towered over her.

"Yes, you are a big boy," May purred. "And you're all mine."

She knew my thoughts and feelings, and as much as I'd always been a loner, I was okay with sharing everything with her.

May rested on her elbow and quickly kissed my lips. I wanted to pull her closer, but she resisted. "We need to clean up," she said, stretching before getting to her feet. She looked down at me still in all my naked glory and bit her lip. "This may sound weird, but I really need to clean up and brush my teeth the morning after a hunt." She tried to finger-comb her hair, but dried blood made the task impossible.

I nodded. She was beautiful to me anyway and after what we'd shared last night the blood around her mouth and in her hair didn't bother me. But I could feel she was uncomfortable, the loathing she felt for what she was and what she'd done apparent. Before I could say anything, she was jogging down to the river and standing waist-deep in the freezing water. She turned to face me and laughed. "You know how last night I told you we don't feel the cold?" I nodded. "I lied. This is fucking freezing." With a squeal she ducked down, fully submerging her body and head into the rushing water.

I ran in beside her and not taking a second to change my mind, dived straight under. It was freezing, but it was nowhere near as cold as it would have been if I didn't have werewolf blood coursing through my veins.

We quickly cleaned the blood off our bodies and as best we could from our hair, then dressed in our clothes from last night.

With an extra spring in my step, we started our walk hand in hand through the woods toward Gran's cottage until the smell of blood caught on the morning breeze. Picking up my pace, May was right beside me. "It's not human," May said, understanding my sense of urgency. "Well, not completely human anyway."

"Hey, Gran," I called as we threw open the back door. It wasn't locked as it should have been.

“In here, Connor.” I followed her trembling voice to her bedroom. Dressed in a long-sleeve flannelette nightgown, Gran was perched on the edge of her bed with the crossbow in her hands. At her feet lay Landon’s dead body.

I took a staggering step back before launching over the body to get to Gran. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you? Or bite you?” My gaze ran over every visible part of her, noting only a light smattering of blood on one sleeve. It was Landon’s blood, I could tell the difference by the scent.

“He came in the middle of the night. He was so quiet.” Gran’s eyes were glued to the dead body as she spoke. May grabbed a quilt from the blanket box at the end of the bed and covered him. I sat beside Gran and held her trembling body. “At first, I thought it was you because he was so . . . calm. But then he growled, a deep guttural sound that I felt right to my very core, and I knew it wasn’t you, Connor. I knew you would never come here like that. Even if you were sure you wouldn’t hurt me, you wouldn’t want to scare me.”

“You did what you needed to do, Gran.” May crouched in front of Gran and rested her hands on Gran’s knees. “You had no choice. He would have killed you.”

“Do you know him?” Gran asked, finally shifting her focus from Landon to May.

May nodded. “He’s been hunting me for a long time since I left the pack. That’s Landon, the one who bit Connor and turned him.”

Gran glanced at me. “He was big. You were lucky to survive.”

“May protected me.” The love I felt for May was immeasurable, but in speaking those words, I knew I would forever have that person, that mate who had my back no matter what. “She’s a force to be reckoned with.”

May’s eyes held mine, and I felt the love she had for me flow through our invisible bond. “I will always protect the ones I love. You’re my pack now, Connor. We’re family.”

# EPILOGUE

Gran was still a little shell-shocked as May and I carried Landon's body into the woods and gave him a fitting burial. I knew he should have been returned to his pack, but to do that we would have had to go there ourselves because from what May told me, they were living off the grid with no form of communication.

Christmas morning finally arrived. It was a Christmas of many firsts.

My first Christmas with May, my mate, the love of my life.

The first Christmas as a shifter.

And the first Christmas that Gran would be spending without Pop since they had married some sixty odd years ago.

It felt insensitive to be joyous when I knew Gran must be missing Pop so terribly, so May and I decided to dial it down a few notches and focus on giving Gran as much space or as many hugs as she needed. So, it was a pleasant surprise when May and I finally surfaced after a rather hot and heavy morning session to hear Christmas carols playing and Gran humming along.

Hugging Gran, I rested my chin on the top of her head. "Merry Christmas, Gran."

"Merry Christmas, my boy." Gran stretched out her arm to scoop May into the hug. "Merry Christmas, angel."

May's eyes instantly misted over, and she wrapped her arms around both of us. "Merry Christmas, Gran. I'm so happy to be here with you." She looked up at me and smiled. "With you both. Thank you for welcoming me into your home."

Gran's sniffle belied her cheer. "I just wish Albert was here to meet you. He would have loved you and been as happy as I am to have Connor home and finally settled."

We spent the next few hours cooking, chatting, and caroling together before sitting down with enough food to feed a small army. When our bellies were full, and we thought we couldn't fit any more in without bursting, Gran brought out a cheesecake topped with peaches and a Christmas pudding decorated with glace cherries.

"Oh my god, Gran. We can't eat all this!" May laughed as she cut herself a wedge of cheesecake.

"Well, whatever's left over we can give to the motel guests who aren't fortunate enough to be spending the holiday with family."

"Oh, that's a great idea. I saw Mr. Michaelson in room five yesterday. He seemed very upset he couldn't get home."

"We should make up little baskets for everyone."

"I saw you had more canned peaches. Do you think you could show me how to make your famous peach pie that Connor loves so much?"

“I’d love to teach you. I was worried all my recipes would go to waste seeing as I didn’t have anyone to pass them on to,” Gran squeezed May’s hand, “now I do.”

I smiled at Gran and May as they chatted like old friends. The two women in my life that I loved more than life itself.

I could do this.

I’d always believed that shifters were so different from humans. That we were opposites and could never cohabit peacefully. Yet here we were; a pure-blood werewolf, a newly turned wolf, and a human. Family, united by our love for one another despite our differences. My senses were permanently heightened, my speed and strength increased, but I was still me. I had the same thoughts and feelings I had before, the same likes and dislikes. I wasn’t one or the other, but a blend of both. I’d like to think the best of both and I had May to thank for teaching me, nurturing, and guiding me to be the best version of myself.

May’s hand squeezed my thigh under the table as she leaned toward me. “I love you too, Connor.”

Gran chuckled. “I used to think I could read Albert’s mind, but you two have me beat.”

May placed her fork on her plate and wiped her mouth with a napkin. “It’s not so much reading each other’s minds. I can’t hear the words he’s thinking—”

“Lucky for me,” I joked.

May rolled her eyes before continuing, “But I can sense his feelings and read his mood.”

“So, what is he feeling now?” Gran asked, giving me a sly grin.

“Love.” May’s eyes captured mine and held them for a second. “Contentment and lots of love.”

**~and they all lived happily ever after~**

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to everyone who has taken a chance on my first paranormal romance book, published under a variation on my usual name, Lisa Edward.
Paranormal is something I've loved reading since childhood, so this book was a real labor of love. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I loved writing it. There will be more paranormal to come so stay tuned.
There are a few people to thank who have helped along the way.
Lilliana Anderson for her encouragement and cover design skills. Your feedback is always valued.
Kat T. Masen for sharing your knowledge so willingly with the author community. I learn something and come away inspired every time we chat. Thank you also for 'lending me' your husband Steve for his formatting expertise.
My beta readers Corinne Mazille and Marcia Bucktin for the comments and critiques that have helped make this book better.
And my super beta reader, proofreader, and biggest cheerleader, Layla, my daughter and bestie. You will always be my greatest achievement.
Love to you all, Lisa x